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OR,

THE COLD DECK ON BLAZER'S.

BY WM. R. EYSTER.

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "DERRINGER
DICK," "HANDS UP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RACKET AT BLAZER'S BAR.

"A MIGHTY cold day, gentlemen, when I get left, and if you have any curiosity about the temperature at Blazer's Bar, all you have to do is to pursue your investigations in this direction and you will learn wisdom and the condition of the atmosphere at one and the same time."

The speaker was a mountain rose—a girl with a fresh, clear face, a lithe, swaying form, a dainty hand and foot, and the air of one perfectly at home in the midst of her wild surroundings.

And it was well in a way that she should be so, since the surroundings were such as

"EASY, ME NOBLE JUKE! OBSARVE THESE SHOOTIN' IRONS!"

might well make a neophyte shiver and shrink. Blazer's Bar, in its every-day dress, was bad enough, but when it was all dressed up in its Sunday fixings, and out on the war-path, it took a man of nerve to stand in its way.

And Brilliant Bess was very much in its way.

In front of her was a gang of tough citizens, in full paint and feathers, more than one brawny hand resting on a revolver, while a little in advance of the rest stood Gentle Joe, the sleekest, smoothest, silkenest, yet the very worst man in the lot.

"My sweet child," he answered, in his softest tones, a quiet smile on his handsomely chiseled lips, "no one here has the slightest curiosity about the temperature of this or any other section of the country. What we want is the high-toned gentleman who is hiding behind your skirtycloths. If you are wise you will stand aside and let justice take its course."

"Justice in Blazer's Bar!"

Her voice was full of ringing scorn.

"What justice is there among you wolves? I know them all; and you, Gentle Joe, the worst of the gang! I ask no odds of any of you. I'll take a stand for justice; and woe to the man whose ideas of it differ from mine! He'll never meddle with another case in a Judge Lynch court. And where I leave off there will be another to take up the work, if need be."

At the back of Gentle Joe, a rough, ragged man crept closer.

"Easy, Joe!" he muttered. "She's a daisy with ther irons, an' what she says an' does Sing'lar Sam will swear to—an' he's a boss, right hyar in Blazer's. Take yer time with ther daisy, an' ef we don't git him ter-day, we'll hev him ter-morrer. Ther night's young, an' it's a long time till mornin'."

"And meantime we're balked by a girl. Not this time—some other time. I've got to the front of Blazer's to run this thing and I'll stop when the job is done, and not sooner."

So he said, as much for the benefit of the rest as for the man at his shoulder. While he spoke his eyes watched warily the girl in the doorway.

She never winced, nor allowed her gaze to wander from his face, while her hand still unwaveringly held the cocked revolver with which she menaced the rest of the gang.

Ragged Rufe, the counselor, skipped nimbly to one side, and watched the two with an evil grin on his battered face.

"I c'd drap her easy whar she stan's but then ther howl'd be on her side, an' I reckon they'd be ongrateful ernuf ter swing ther man, an' let ther daisy have his effeks fer a monyerment. An' him a-gittin' outen ther back winder!"

He concluded his soliloquy with a chuckle. He had just noticed that the man for whom the crowd raved was no longer crouching behind the girl.

The chuckle changed into an exclamation of surprise. Gentle Joe had sprung suddenly forward, throwing up his hands as he went.

The girl was as good as her word. Without an instant's hesitation she raised her hand and fired.

It was point-blank range, and Brilliant Bess was known to be a perfect shot at any distance, yet the rush of Gentle Joe was not even checked. When he threw up his hand he had flung the butt of his revolver just in the range of the girl's weapon, and the bullet, glancing along the stock, had dropped harmlessly to the side. Before she could use the weapon again he had caught her around the waist and flung her to one side. Then the mob rushed in through the open doorway.

"It warn't wuth ther reesk, Gentle," chuckled the ragamuffin. "I seen thet ther gerloot hed skipped, an' ef I hedn't wanted ter see what c'd be made outen a teeklish job I'd gi'n yer a hint. Yer did it well, but I'm 'feared we'll hear frum Sing'lar Sam 'bout it. He's that squeemish 'bout ther daisy thet it ain't safe ter look her way."

"You didn't suppose I would take water on his account, did you? I would want no trouble with him, and least of all would I see Bess come to harm; but, when men talk women must get out of the way."

"Thet's so; an' we'll have him yit. He'll

strike fur Jumptown ef he gits clear ov ther Bar; an' thar we'll hev no Bess Stanley takin' up fur a man ez c'd cut a throat in cold blood. Hi! It looks ez tho' they'd run him down, arter all."

From within the house there arose a snarling cry, then a confused medley of sounds, and, a moment later, the mob burst forth, bringing in their midst, as a captive, the man about whom there had been so much racket.

No shrinking tenderfoot was this, but a man a little worse looking than the worst; and as he was led forward to meet the judgment of his peers he was greeted with a howl from those who had not joined in his capture. In all that crowd, when Bess Stanley was once swept away, there did not seem to be a single one who was not anxious for his death.

And yet, in spite of the yell he put into the general chorus, Ragged Rufe must have had an idea of his own, since he let the crowd with its prisoner sweep by, while he touched Gentle Joe lightly on his arm.

"I'd drap it now, honey. You've done ernuf fur your share. I'd let sum ov those bully boys, what likes ter run things, git hold ov the drag-ropes, while you an' me watches how things runs, frum ther outside. It's all right up to ther present time, but now an' then there's sum afterclaps ter this sort er work, an' it ain't best ter be too fur forrads."

"Right you are, old man. I'm not tying ropes myself, but when a camp tries a man for murder, and says the man must hang, it's not always healthy to be too far back, either."

"Allers pervidin' ther's bin ary murder done," put in the bummer, with a sly wink. "I've knowed men es war hung fur bein' in ther road, an' them jest ez innercent ez lam's. Seems ter me this hyer yell sot up mighty suddint, an' ther proof ag'in' him might be a leetle stronger. You ain't takin' much stock in it yerself, ef I hev one eye on it. Eh?"

"Pretty time to come around with your doubts when the man is as good as dead. If you have any proofs in his favor spit them out. By heavens! He sha'n't die if he's innocent!"

"Thar you go, off at half-cock. 'Cause they can't prove he's guilty don't say thet he's innercent, does it? He deserves hangin' aryhow, an' thet's ernuf fur Ragged Rufe."

Gentle Joe looked at his evil-faced counselor in unspeakable disgust, and the excruciatingly sly wink that the bummer gave him hardly sufficed to put him in a better humor.

"Innocent or guilty, I swear the man sha'n't hang *this* time!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Oh, come now, honey, yer wouldn't fight ther camp, would yer?"

"The camp! By the holies, I'd fight the territory if I once said so! Watch me, Rufe, and see me sail in."

Without another word he broke away, striding toward the throng that was dragging off its victim.

CHAPTER II.

AN ARREST OF JUDGMENT.

RAGGED RUFÉ put his hands in his pockets, and looked after Gentle Joe with an air that spoke more of commiseration than anything else.

"A good leetle man are Gentle Joseph, but spiled more ner less, an' jest gittin' ready ter bite off a heap bigger hunk than he kin chew."

"Thet's ther way, tho'! Jest ez I gits eenterested in a man, suthin's bound ter happen ter him. Sum dies ov ther jim-jams, an' sum gits the'r thrapple stretched fur hoss-stealin', an'—yes, thar war one ole pard died in his bunk. That war Si Sellers, ez war fool ernuf ter wander back East. He died in ther Hotel de Sing Sing."

"An' I can't ford a new hat-band jest now, or ter spruce up fer a mourner. I sw'ar, I b'leve I'd better coax him out, an' let ther durned cuss hang, tho' it's rough on an ole side-pard."

If Ragged Rufe had any serious desire to be of use, he took a very deliberate way of showing it. He sauntered slowly away in the wake of the mob, and arrived in front of the Eagle about a minute after the court had attempted to reopen.

"Pris'ner," a harsh, rasping voice was saying. "yer war fairly tried by ez squar' a jury ez ever sot at Blazer's Bar, an' when yer case war left in the'r hands, yer hedn't sand ernuf ter wait fur ther jedgment. Ef nothin' else war offered, that'd be proof ernuf ter convince this hyer court, which hez decided ther case on ther facts, however, an' now axes hev yer ary thing ter offer afore it passes sentence? Speak up like a leetle man, an' we'll listen to ther las' speech you'll hev a chance ter make. Ef yer *should* mention ther names ov yer pards, it would be taken inter considerashun."

"Ef I onderstand ther honer'ble court, she hev passed jedgment 'thout regard ter ther jury," answered the prisoner, in a tolerably strong voice and looking at nobody in particular. "Ov course I hev a slight eenterest in hearin' what they hev ter say, tho' I s'pose it don't make much diff'rence. Fire away! I'm tired o' torkin', an' I wouldn't give a cent fur the diff'rence atwixt hangin' an' starvashun. Gimme a boost, an' lemme go over ther rangel I'm on ther way now."

"Yer ackno'lidges, then, ez you're ther gerloot we've been after?"

"Ackno'lidge nothin'! I struck ther burg 'bout sundown, an' war mounted on sight, why, wharfore, an' fur which, I can't say. But ef you'd go a leetle slow, an' stir 'round ther wood-pile, I reckon you'd rout out ther nigger. I'm in your hands, pards; run me ter suit yer own blessed selves."

He spoke with an air of weary unconcern, that was rather puzzling to a man of the caliber of Mart Hammers, who had been elevated to the dignity of judge on brief notice, and without much regard to his own wishes.

"Fur why, then, did yer try to cl'ar out ef yer knowed thar war some mistake? This camp are squar' ez they make 'em, an' yer mout hev knowed we didn't want more ner justice. Mebbe you'll tell this hyar court an' jury thet thar wa'n't a man lyin' in the trail with his throat cut when you come down ther mount in ter Blazer?"

"Didn't come down ther mount'in at all," responded the prisoner shortly. "Come right erlong up the crick from Jones's Fork. Bin thar a week perspectin'; an' I kin prove it; but I don't say ez thar would be eny use. Ef ther jury are through it's too late ter open ther case ag'in."

"Strikes me yer wants ter be hung," answered Hammers, shaking his head.

"Looks thet way, an' it's a pity ter disserp'int a man when he's set on a thing. Ef yer hain't ary thing ter say we may ez well git ready fur ther send-off."

It was plain that Mart was not altogether satisfied in his own mind; but that made no difference to the crowd behind him. There was an ominous growl at his hesitation, and he knew unless there was something overwhelmingly in the man's favor, and very suddenly introduced, that the proceedings would lose their semblance of form and degenerate into the boldest kind of mob-work.

In that case he did not want to stand in the road—and he did not see how he could well get away from lending a helping hand. He looked around in a disgusted sort of way, that had in it an appeal to the crowd. The Bar understood him well enough, but had no intention of letting him off.

"Sail ahead, Mart; you're doin' of ther thing right, an' no one kin say it warn't a squar' deal ef Mart Hammers made t. Finish up ther job an' call on ther boys ter help. We're all a-waitin'. He's jest a-chinnin' ov yer. Thar war Jess Hurley ez sez he seen him over at Jumptown yesterday. Ain't that ernuff?"

In detachments the crowd spoke, and all together they made up a statement something like that, and then there came a pause that allowed another and a single voice to intrude.

"Excuse me, Baby Burt, but that's not quite enough when a man's life is hanging on it. This is hardly my circus, though I was fool enough to take a hand in it. I can't say that I like the looks of the fellow, but I'll say a word, whether it counts in his favor or not. I was down the creek myself, yesterday, and so I know he was at the Fork and *couldn't* have come over from Jumptown. Sorry to contradict Mr. Hurley, but I know he was lying. I don't suppose any one here is going to doubt my veracity, and I think this court had better adjourn over till to-

morrow and see if we can't find a way to get a little more light on the whole thing."

It was Gentle Joe that was talking again, and this time on the other side! True, he had only stepped in front of them when they had followed the fugitive to the cabin of Bess Stanley, and had had no part in the trial itself; but such a change of base was unusual with him, and everybody knew that it meant something.

There was again a silence, and this time as though some one had let down a wet blanket. When Gentle Joe talked he always meant something.

Then a voice from the outer edge of the crowd sung out:

"What's ther Gentle got ter do with this? He's only one man, an' he can't stan' ag'in' ther Bar. Whar's ther rope? Run her through with a whoop; an' then we'll git at suthin' that pays better. No use ter stan' hyer all night. Gopher him, boys, an' hyar's a hand ter take hold on ther drag-rope!"

"And here's a hand to pull the other way—full, and the best in the deck. You, Dave Dukely, dry up or drop! I've got you lined!"

With the easy celerity for which he was notorious, Gentle Joe produced a brace of revolvers, and one of them, as if by magic, covered the last speaker, while the other seemed to every man there to be waiting specially for him.

Every man, that is, but Ragged Rufe.

The old fellow was watching the proceedings with a critical eye, and an occasional nod of approbation. He rubbed his hands together at times when a point seemed to be made, and his oily chuckle indicated an intense, if suppressed, delight. He looked on with an air of proprietorship that appeared to indicate that he supposed the exhibition was gotten up expressly for his own amusement. If it had not been for the deep interest that Blazer's Bar was taking in the show, it might have resented a comparative stranger's criticism on their high pressure style. But in peace, Ragged Rufe had not been considered worthy of notice; and in war, as long as he did not push himself too far forward, he would be overlooked altogether.

"Sand! Thet ain't no name fur it. Why, he's just so chuck-full ov it he's liable ter slop over," he muttered to himself. "All ther same, ef Major Widespin sots ther gang on him they'll take him in, sure. I'd better soothe him down a leetle, fur fear he'll git too fur over ther line. Hyar goes!"

Least of all did Gentle Joe suspect the ragged old bummer who had "brought him his luck" the night he struck the camp, and whom, with a gambler's superstition, he had taken by the hand ever since. He could do what he chose in Blazer's Bar, since Gentle Joe had said that he was his friend; though behind was the danger that, if the town once went wild against Joe, they would be looking after his bummer friend very shortly thereafter. Perhaps that was what he wanted to provide for.

At any rate, just when Joe held the drop on the gang, and those in the front rank were beginning to look around for a way out of the line of danger, Ragged Rufe made himself solid with the Bar.

With a quick, pantherish spring, he was at the back of Gentle Joe, and, without a word of warning, threw his arms around him, pinioning his elbows tightly to his side.

At that a snarling cry arose on all sides. Gentle Joe had held his position as chief with the uncertainty of a tiger-tamer among the cages, and now the beasts were loose and on the rampage.

CHAPTER III.

THE PICNIC.

At the front came two men who were evidently *bad*, at the best, and who, after the way they had just been bluffed, were seemingly mad to get even. They were Baby Burt and Jess Hurley.

The Baby was a giant in size and strength, and about as reckless, hard-drinking a rough as Blazer's Bar could boast. He could shoot, cut and stab with the worst of them; but he took more kindly to the use of his fists. After he had broken Kiddy Kain's neck with a single blow, the boys would rather have preferred him to use the irons in the settlement of his little difficulties.

Jess Hurley was all the other way. He

seldom pushed himself forward in a disturbance; and he would stand abuse like a little lamb until the point was reached where an extemporized jury would find due cause and provocation. Then came a shot so quick that no one saw him draw, or could exactly say how it was done; but it always killed.

The two men hunted in couples, and great as was the contrast between them in every way, no faster friends ever were seen.

Up to this time they had never appeared to come in contact with Gentle Joe, and if he had not mentioned names it was pretty well understood they would not have bothered him. The Baby was not notorious for crowding a shooter, pure and simple; and Jess had reasons of his own for not setting up his body for perforation.

The movement of Ragged Rufe gave the crowd a chance; and Hurley seemed willing to take advantage of it. He had a pistol out and up, with his finger already on the trigger, when the Baby dashed aside the weapon.

"Hold on, Jess! This hyar are my racket. Let me git my han's on him, an' I'll take him all apart!"

So he grated, in the huskiest of whispers; then dashed forward at Joe Lipscombe, with Hurley following at his elbow.

"Play light on him, Baby! Gentle Joe's a bad man to hurt, an' I want him *bad*! Promise you'll play light. Ef you don't they'll end by hangin' you."

Jess Hurley's head seemed to have suddenly cleared. The Baby himself could see that it would not be the square thing to strike the little gambler when another man was holding his arms, though that position of affairs did not last long.

Ragged Rufe had taken a good hold, and he was by no means a weakling, and always considered that he was stronger than he looked, but after he had had his arms around Gentle Joe for about three seconds he was uncertain whether to consider all that a mistake, or to believe that he had got hold of the rear section of a cyclone.

It was done so quickly that there really was no time to consider how it was being done. One minute he was hanging on, and the next he was hanging off. Lipscombe had stooped quickly, flung him sprawling over his head; and then darted at the Baby.

Nothing could have more delighted the Bar. Its people were all willing to defer private vengeance if by so doing they could see a meeting between the chiefs. And if there had been time for betting it would have been two to one that the Baby ground the life out of the smaller man, or his pard threw in a bullet about the time it was most needed. Expert as he was known to be with the revolver no one supposed that Gentle Joe could stand up before the heavy-weight pugilist, who was known as the boss slugger of the district that owned Blazer's Bar for a center, Ragged Rufe rolled out of sight and out of mind while a ring formed as if by magic, in the center of which stood the two, with hands well up, eying each other after the sharp, cold way of two practiced athletes.

To the surprise of the greater part of the spectators Baby Burt was silent and watchful, from the very first moment that Lipscombe threw himself into position. Those that were expecting to see him rush forward and overwhelm the smaller man with a ponderous stroke or two were doomed to disappointment, and in reality underrated Baby Burt more than they dreamed of.

The Baby was no man's fool, and his thoughts ran something like this:

"The Gentle ain't nothin' pertickler laid in fur me; an' he ain't kickin' up this 'cause he's got a big mad on. Ef so, he knows what he's a-bettin' on, fur he don't fool himself bad on what's the size ov his hand. I kin scoop ther pot ef ther deal's fair; but all ther same, it may be jest ez well ter see what he's got back. I'll score more p'int's ef I let him lead."

"An' Jess tole me ter play light. He wants ter see what ther Gentle hez an' I'll give him a chance ter call. Ef Joe thinks he kin show afore Jess picks trigger he's fooled, bad."

So the big man stood on guard, his hands slowly weaving to and fro, while he waited for the other to develop his game.

It was simply reckless nonsense in the

eyes of the bystanders. When Joe found out the big man would not lead he dashed straight in.

He was quick as lightning, though his blows lacked steam, straight as they were delivered. One, two, three! From the shoulder out they came; and though Burt guarded skillfully he was a shade too slow, and every one of them managed to connect.

At that the Baby seemed to grow cooler than ever; the gleam left his eyes, and was replaced by a wooden expression that, in daylight, would have been a perfect mask. Even then, with a deceptive and by no means steady light, it served well the purpose of disguising his intentions.

A yell of surprise went up as the crowd saw him sniffling in a mechanical sort of way, to keep out of sight the ruby that would make itself visible at the end of his bugle.

Dancing out of range, Joe looked keenly at his man. Then, crouching low, he made a spring with hands outstretched, ready to take a hold.

The spectators thought Burt would meet him half-way at that sort of game, but they were mistaken. For the first time Baby Burt drew back his arm, and struck for all he was worth.

It was done too quickly for any guard or parry to be offered, and the blow caught Lipscombe high up on the forehead as he skillfully ducked.

Heels over head he rolled for half a dozen yards, and then lay stretched out, with only a little nervous quivering in his limbs to show that he was still alive.

"Knocked out the first round," said an oily voice, that was beginning to be pretty well known at the Bar. "I sed ter Joseph that ther mouthful were bigger ner he could bring his teeth clean through, but it wa'n't no use ter talk. He thort he knowed his own biz best, an' mebbe ef he c'u'd really hev got hold, he'd 'a' made a spread-eagle outen ther Baby, big ez he air. But he didn't, an' that ends it. Consider ther sponge throwed up, an' go on with yer sheep-stealin'."

Ragged Rufe's appeal was drowned out in a roar from the crowd. Jess Hurley was leading his pard away, but Dave Dukely, who had lately been singled out for special notice, saw the chance to get even.

"Now yer hev him," he shouted. "send him up erlong with ther other! Hyer goes! I'll knot ther rope, an' all han's jine ther pull thet takes him up ter kingdom come!"

He was quick with the suggestion; and, as he rushed forward, it looked as though the crowd might come with him.

But there was a slight impediment in the way in the shape of Ragged Rufe, who, kneeling on Lipscombe's prostrate form, looked unconcernedly up.

"Easy, me noble jake! Obsarve these shootin' irons! Fair play are what I want, an' fair play's what this court are goin' ter insist on. Consider me ez a depity, swore in accordin' ter law an' Gospel, an' jest don't try ter resky a pris'ner thet's under ther eyes ov ther bird ov justize. Han's up, Dave, an' no snap shots, er run yer reesks."

Gentle Joe's revolvers had not pointed more unerringly, and Dave Dukely halted. He said nothing, expecting some one else to speak for him, and give him a chance to get in his work.

Instead of that, Mart Hammers's voice was the one that was heard; and what he said did not help him a bit, since the twin revolvers never wavered, though all the rest of the crowd was looking another way.

"Say, you galoots, better let up on this racket and look round fur ther prisoner. While you've bin chinnin' he's took leg bail, an' jumped ther ranch."

And very true was it. In the excitement over the pugilists the prime cause of the picnic had been spirited away. Which way he had gone, and when, were only subjects for guess, though some one suggesting that the direction toward Jones's Fork would be a good cover to draw, the best part of the crowd went ramping off down the straggling street, with Jess Hurley and the Baby in the lead.

Then Gentle Joe's voice was raised, though little louder than a whisper.

"Thankee, old man; but if you wouldn't press me *quite* so hard it would leave me considerable more breath. And I don't reckon

I'm altogether through with the Baby and his pards."

"Wiggle out then, fur I'm tired a keepin' ov them kivered, an' I'd sooner you'd blow yer own horn an' run ther fish wagon till yer git through with ther town."

Ragged Rufe did not show any signs of surprise when Lipscombe slid nimbly out from under his knee and stood erect, apparently none the worse for wear.

"I guess they won't hang him, this evening, if he's as good as he looks. Now we'll keep an eye on Bess. They may bring some harm to her if we don't shut them off. When Sam gets back they can drive on with their hearse and he'll furnish a full load if they try any shenanigen."

"An' s'posin' they go fur you?"

"That's what I want," answered Joe, with a queer smile. "I yearn for a square crack at the Bar—and it looks as though I was going to get it at last. I want to see who is who; and its worth the risk."

"All right ef yer think so, an' I don't jest guess ye'r fur wrong. Ef signs go fur anything hyar they kim."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TROUBLE IN THE JUMPTOWN STAGE.

It was only a few miles to Jumptown, and the stage that had rattled and banged all the day over the tiresome trail seemed actually to become a sensate thing as it settled into the home stretch with a smooth, gliding motion, that made the three passengers almost simultaneously utter a low sigh of relief.

The lady who occupied the back seat in lonely grandeur, looked up with a brightened face.

"Who would have believed it? One can actually imagine something of the poetry of motion that they talk about. How *did* they ever manage to pick out a bit of road like this? Had the day's jaunt been only half as good we would have been landed in Jumptown hours ago."

She spoke in a silvery tone, and as she ceased she thrust her pretty face out of the side of the coach, and took an interested view of her surroundings, without waiting to hear the response of the man addressed.

She was a sweet-looking little woman—all too fair and delicate, one would think, for the time and place. She looked as though she could not be a day over twenty, was a blonde with the loveliest complexion, and most finely molded form, and had large liquid eyes of the deepest blue, while her hair fell over her shoulders in a great mass of golden curls, that even now, after the hard day's jaunt, could scarcely be called disheveled.

Her companion was tall, thin and saturnine. Seeing the two together one could scarcely imagine them acquaintances, much less friends. Mordaunt Mortimer was the appellation by which he was known and it seemed like an outrage to hang to such a good name so unpleasant-looking a man as he was.

"Really, Miss Ormsby," was his answer, delivered in measured, pompous tones, "I am unable to see anything strange about it. There must be good roads somewhere, and why not here? You had better draw in your face. Our driver seems to be reckless and the limbs unpleasantly near."

"Reckon yer don't know ther name ov this speshul bit ov ther road," broke in the harsh, rasping voice that belonged to the third occupant of the coach.

"Ef yer wa'n't strangers in this hyer section you'd be a-wishin' yer war either back on ther divide, or else over ther only real dangerous part ov ther road from Jumptown ter King George's Flat."

"Dangerous! How so?" There was a sharpness about her tones that seemed strangely out of place.

"Reckon yer never heard ov Royal George an' ther gang that trails at his back. He runs this hyer turnpike, an' nine outen ten will strike his gate a few hundred rod funder on. Then jest unload. When he calls fur toll thar's biz in the air. Oh, he's jest a nasty man ter strike ag'in' ther grain!"

"I do not understand. Who or what is it that you are speaking of? What business has he with us?"

"Ther biz ov a man ez plays ther game ov Hands Up! fur all it's wuth."

"And if this is so, how comes it that you are running the risks of this trail, almost alone, and with no means of protection?"

"Ye'r a leetle eggsited, ma'am. Does I look like a man ez had anything ter reesk? Them ez has nothin' can't lose; an' fur per-teeshun thar's ther game ez Buck Burke ginerally plays all alone. I tho't I'd giv' yer a hint ov what war ahead, so thet when ther circus opened, an' ther band struck up, yer wouldn't be too blamed skeered ter enjoy ther racket."

Mordaunt Mortimer looked sourly at the lady.

"As we might have expected. Two sane people could hardly have set out on a journey of this kind without anticipating some such trouble. I suppose I am sane, for I looked for it. Whether you did or not, all the same it is coming."

"You bet she's comin'. Fact are, she's hyar now!"

Buck Burke was speaking; and if he hadn't spoken a word, his actions would have told sufficiently well what he meant. By a sudden, dexterous twitch he whirled Mortimer over upon the opposite seat, alongside of Mrs. Ormsby; and before he had fairly settled into his place, Mortimer was covered by a revolver that was lying straight for his left eyebrow. A twin weapon was suspiciously convenient in Burke's other hand.

"I'm mighty sorry ef it puts yer to ary inconvenience; but ther fact are, I'm on ther make. *Shell out!*"

The surprise was complete; Mrs. Ormsby gave a start and a little cry, while Mortimer drew himself up so straight that he looked about a foot taller than ordinary.

"I—I—must say that this is extraordinary—perfectly extraordinary."

He jerked the words out in a mechanical sort of way, and after the first elongation of his neck hardly a muscle seemed to move. His hands remained half extended just as they had happened to be when Buck Burke first made his demand.

"Dunno 'bout that, boss. This hyar ain't ary thing onusual. It's bein' blame fool ernuf ter hev ther hull top ov yer head blowed off fur not list'nin' when some one's a-shoutin'—that's considered ther extr'ordinary thing 'round these regions. An' that's just what'll happen ter both ov yer ef yer don't fork over in 'bout half a shake ov a gray wolf's tail."

"But, but—my dear man, you are laboring under a wild misapprehension. We at least took the ordinary precautions. Together we have not a dozen dollars on our persons. To those you are welcome. It is worth that to have been interviewed by so distinguished a person as Royal George. If you will assure me that my motions will not be misconstrued I shall take great pleasure in handing them to you. After that I hope our cordial relations will be no further disturbed."

Burke looked at the speaker, whose tones were to the full as low as his own, seemingly gauged by them, and uttered a short, dry laugh.

"You don't pan out so bad fur a tenderfoot. I've seen toughs with a record that didn't show half yer nerve in a racket, an' I ain't a-doubtin' ov yer; but yer don't sabbe Royal George ef yer think he's goin' ter let yer off fur half a slug er tharabouts. He's on ther make, an' knows ther level ter work on. Thar's a leetle package ov papers ez Mrs. Ormsby kerries, that'll just pay ther toll, an' we'll leave ther coin yer was a-speaking ov fur a starter in Jumptown. Mebbe you could bu'st a faro-bank on it an' come out squar', after all. But them papers are my meat, an' ther sooner I hev 'em the sooner you'll be outen danger."

"Never," retorted Mortimer, with more warmth than he had yet showed. "You would never dare—"

"Thar's where ye'r out," responded Burke, savagely. "I'll count ten an' then away goes yer soul bolts."

Mrs. Ormsby had remained silent, but a listener. As she heard the fierce threat her hand darted to her bosom—if she had been a man the movement would have been her last, since Royal George, Buck Burke, or whatever his name might be, saw it beyond a doubt.

But, Mrs. Ormsby was the reverse of dangerous looking, and it was no concealed

weapon that her hand sought so hastily. On the contrary, it was a small pocketbook, bound with a red ribbon.

She tore off the ribbon with an impatient jerk, and spreading open the book revealed its contents.

"Here! These are the only papers we have; take your choice of them. Take all of them if you want; but then take yourself and your weapons away."

The little hands were just as steady as his own; her eyes looked into his unflinchingly; while there was the ring of truth in her tones.

Buck Burke did not hesitate. He thrust away one of his revolvers, grabbed the pocketbook, and kicking open the stage door sprung lightly out into the trail.

"So long!" he shouted after them, as the coach rolled on; "I'll see you all later."

Then he darted behind a clump of shrubbery and would have been lost to view, even had the passengers cared to take a last glance.

And all this happened while the driver cracked his whip and urged along his willing steeds in blissful unconsciousness. A moment or two later, though, as his coach rounded a slight bend, he leaned down at hearing excited voices within; and, just as he opened his mouth to ask what might be the matter there, he became aware that there was something wrong somewhere else. From the roadside, there came a sharp hail:

"Down brakes, an' hands up! Ef yer goes another rod we'll plug yer, *sure!* Hyar's yer toll-gate; an' hyar's yer Royal George. *Shell out er peg out.* Yer has yer chance."

CHAPTER V.

ROYAL GEORGE'S LITTLE CLEAN UP.

"Hold on, boss; don't shute. You'll find us all reasonable critturs. Ef thar's any pilgrims inside ez ain't, blamed ef I don't take a hand in myself! So go slow with them irons."

The tones more than the words showed in what serious earnest was the driver; and as he spoke, he jammed down the brake and drew in his steeds.

"All right, old man. What you got inside? Speak up, an' don't get a mile off ther truth, fur we give yer fair warnin' ef there's ary gum games tried, we'll plug you, *sure!*"

"Thar's only three inside, an' two ov them are tenderfoots, ez don't count, not goin' fur ter say ez one ov 'em's a female. Buck Burke air ther third, an' everybody knows *he* won't shute."

"All right, then; we'll take your word for it. But jest recomember we've got you kivered. An' you, in thar; go slow. We're comin' ter look yer over."

Three or four masked men stepped out from where they had lain concealed by the roadside, and swaggered up to the stage-door.

"You, Buck Burke, step out with yer hands up!" exclaimed the leader, as he carefully aimed with his pistol at the spot where he expected the challenged man to make his appearance.

There was a brief but awkward silence, during which neither man nor sound came from the interior.

"Last warnin'! Ef yer don't show up, we'll begin to chuck lead. We ain't takin' no resks, an' we ain't foolin' 'round hyar all night, either."

"You, Buck, git out ov thar!" nervously yelled the driver, and then from within rose a little cry.

"The villain has been ahead of you all and robbed us himself. He is not here, and we have nothing left for you, so do your worst!"

It was Mrs. Ormsby that spoke, and with a positive courage that was more than half-convincing. If she had waited for her escort to take the lead, the threatened lead-chucking might have begun, for Mordaunt Mortimer was cowering back in his seat, apparently too far gone with fright to care even for himself.

The outlaws rushed forward with exclamations of surprise and anger. In a minute the two passengers were out in the road, and it was made sufficiently clear that there was no other occupant.

"Say, Tony, what's ther meanin' ov this? Ther tally don't 'gree with ther way-bill."

"Sw'ar ter gracious yer can't prove it by me. He must be stickin' 'round somewheres. He war thar a minnit ago. Ax ther female. She kin give yer a pointer ef she will."

"No pointer is necessary," broke in Mrs. Ormsby. "I have told you the simple truth. The villain threw us off our guard with a story about Royal George—"

"Meanin' me. I'm the Simon Pure article," broke in the leader of the road-agents, with a bow and scrape.

"It makes no difference who he meant. He robbed us all the same, and under that name. If you can find him you are welcome to him, and I will guarantee a large reward if you return to us the papers that seemed to be the principal object of interest with him."

"Reckon you would, fur they're ther principal object of ourn. What sorter a racket hev yer bin puttin' up on us? Blame me ef I don't b'lieve this Buck Burke's a side pard o' yourn, ez kept an eye out an' when he seen us a-comin' took yer vallybles fur safe keepin' an' scooted. Sorry, fur it's a mighty bad go. We've got ter hev them dockeyments, an' ef we can't find 'em one way, mebbe we kin another. Which ov you two d'yer think kin find him quickest?"

"Find him! Find who?"

"Buck Burke, in course!"

"And why?"

Mrs. Ormsby was not quite so cool. For all their air of semi-deference these men might be as desperate as they looked, and Royal George himself was open to suspicion.

"I'll give yer a reason with ther bark on. One ov yer hes got ter try ter find him, an' git them papers, an' ther other hes ter stay with us fur a reasonable time. If they don't come we'll send a leg in ter hurry things up a leetle. Ef that don't bring 'em right soon, yer kin keep 'em, an' we'll keep a corpse. Take yer ch'ice now; which are ter stay with Royal George?"

"I—I guess you had better stay," began Mortimer, with a general incoherency in his manner. "I—I think I would be the one to find him if it can be done; and I—I wouldn't like to lose a leg. It would be horribly inconvenient."

"You miserable coward, you! No. If they mean it I will remain, and trust to Providence to help me out of the scrape. You, sir, consider me your prisoner until whatever ransom you may demand shall be paid. Certainly a woman whose safety will be worth money to you can trust herself in your hands."

"Ez long ez thar's money in it—ez long ez thar's money in it! Drive on, Tony, an' don't yer stop till yer gits ter Jumptown. Arter that Mister Mortimer kin begin his labors. In yer go; an' I wouldn't advise yer ter look backwards."

As he ceased speaking, the man who claimed to be Royal George seized Mortimer, and with a wonderful ease flung him into the coach, and slammed shut the door.

Without any delay the vehicle started; and before Mortimer had recovered his equilibrium, the lady and her surrounding guard had dropped out of the range of vision, around the bend.

Then Mr. Mortimer got up and straightened himself and chuckled, and sawed the air with his hands in a silent sort of way that was, nevertheless, very expressive; and if Royal George could have seen him he would have been apt to suspect that, in one way or another, he had been very badly fooled.

But, in the midst of the pantomime, a heavy hand was laid on Mortimer's shoulder, and he was forced down into his seat.

He turned his head in sudden and genuine alarm, and his nerves were not quieted by what he saw. Buck Burke had come again, and was sitting there as unconcerned as though nothing had happened.

"You again?" stammered Mortimer. "In the name of Heaven, how did you get here?"

"That's ther wrong place ter talk about when Buck Burke are on ther wing. Ef yer nose are in a right snifty condish, yer might git a smell ov brimstone ef yer struck ther right ellervashun; but that ain't hyer ner thar. Hyar's yer papers—leastwise, those ov 'em ez I don't want. Ef you'll take a fool's advice, I wouldn't tarry long 'round hyar. Thar will be a stage outer Blazer's Bar tomorrow; an' ef yer know what's good, you'll engage a full seat, even ef yer hev ter bespeak ther hull outfit, from boot ter driver."

"It is what I intend to do," answered Mortimer, taken by surprise. "Jumptown is a very good place—to get away from. I have no business there."

"Jest ez I tho't. Yer war bound fur Blazer's frum ther start. Mebbe yer ain't sich a fool ez yer look; and mebbe, when yer git thar, ye'll find ther other Missus Ormsby. Ef yer do, give her my respects, an' say I'm on ther road—I, Ebenezer, ther man frum—"

And Mordaunt Mortimer heard no more, and knew no more until the stage drew up in front of the stage station and hotel kept by Ante Jim, at Jumptown.

The stage came with a roll, and it halted suddenly.

"Bin held up!" yelled Tony. "Thar's a pilgrim inside ez I reckon are skeered outen his boots, an' I left two behind. Durn ther route, it's ther last time I drive it, an' don't yer disremember. Look after ther cargo, Jim, I'm dry."

Without a word more he flung the lines aside and dashed into the bar-room, followed by two-thirds of the curious crowd.

The remainder of the spectators peered anxiously at the coach, and uttered a low hurrah as Ante Jim half led, half carried the single passenger from the stage into the office door.

One man was as curious as the rest, but he kept well in the background. When once he had obtained a fair view of Mortimer's face he wheeled and strode rapidly away.

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

THE man who was undoubtedly interested in getting a sight of Mortimer had not far to walk. A tough-looking little mustang was tethered near by, and in a moment, and without having attracted any attention, he was in the saddle and away on the trail that led from Jumptown to Blazer's Bar.

Some men would have thought well before venturing over that trail in the night time. Corpses had been dropping along it thick and plenty—strangers all—and how they came to be left there had never been satisfactorily explained, though the facts were tolerably suggestive.

"Singular Sam," was the name of the lone equestrian. He had had a more definite title at some previous period, but this suited him well enough, and in ordinary conversation he answered readily to the call of plain Sam.

He was well mounted and armed, and looked abundantly able to take care of himself. He had stout muscles, a keen eye, and the most complete belief in himself; so that he was not likely to be disposed to fear the unknown danger he might be called upon to face along the lonely miles that lay between him and the Bar.

As he went swinging along he presented a picture of health, strength and unconcern.

By and by the shadows grew deeper, the road more precipitous. He glanced carelessly around, like one who simply looks at old, familiar things to see that they are all in their right place.

Once or twice he thought that he heard the ring of a horse's hoofs on the road ahead of him, and then he did bend forward and listen for a moment more intently; but it seemed as though he could not hear when he listened, or listen when he heard. He certainly had no thought of any danger to himself, but had a natural curiosity to know who was on the same road with him.

For an hour or more he traveled on, without being positive that he heard another soul.

Then, suddenly, he flung himself forward upon the neck of his pony, which, an instant later, sunk deliberately to the earth.

At the same time there was the sharp crack of a Winchester rifle.

The spot was well chosen for an ambush.

Upon one hand were the mountain-side, densely covered with an undergrowth; upon the other was a patch of open, where the figure of any passer-by was distinctly lined against the clear sky beyond. And right here was where Singular Sam had been ambuscaded.

He had been riding with his shoulders well bent forward, his head bowed down; and when he ducked at the flash the bullet whistled over him and buried itself in the brain of his pony. The next instant he was

hidden in a clump of bushes, his revolver cocked and ready for his unknown assailant.

He waited for some little time, half-expecting that his hiding-place would be explored by some random shots; but no further attempt was made. He listened intently all the time; but there was not the slightest rustle of departing footsteps.

"Ef ther mount'in won't come ter Mahomet I reckon Mahomet must go to ther mount'in," he muttered to himself. "All ther same it'll hev ter be keerfully done. Ther feller ez slung that lead ain't no slouch; an' ther same game on him wouldn't win twice, don't yer furgit it. Hyar goes."

With the utmost caution he began crawling away from his leafy covert, halting every now and then to listen, and to be sure that he was not losing his bearings. He had a pretty good idea of just where the party who fired the shot had been hidden, and believed he could go the spot with his eyes shut, but he wanted to run no risks, and was accordingly very deliberate.

By slow stages he reached the point he had been aiming at, and could command the spot where the would-be assassins had doubtless stood.

Then he looked around more keenly than ever; and was forced to admit that whoever he was the unknown had vanished with a noiseless skill fully equal to his own. He had hoped that he held the mystery in his gripe—and found that he was mistaken.

Nevertheless the man might still be lurking near; and cautiously he examined the ground, moving slowly from one point to another until at last he reached the very spot from which he had believed that the shot was fired.

Then he found that he had not been mistaken; though few eyes but his could have discovered the faint traces that indicated the late presence of some one just where the opening in the boughs left the way clear to the trail below.

"Put yer hand on er mount'in flea, will yer, when he's got three hops ther start? Not this time, Sammy; some other time. I kin hoof it along over ter Blazer's, an' keep me mouth shut ez ter what I've seen. Mebbe I kin git a pint that way, ez I'd clean miss all tergether ef I shot off my lip. Ary-how I ain't dead yit—an' I'm ther fu'st ez ever slipped through when they tried fur a strike. Thunder! I'll know more about it ef I lose a leg."

And fully satisfied that unless he lost more time than he felt willing to spare he could learn no more about the mystery, Singular Sam quietly glided away.

He had all his belongings on his person, and never went near his dead broncho. If any one was watching it they were doomed to disappointment. And it was fully a mile from the spot that Singular Sam again glided into the trail. In that space he had flanked the point where it seemed possible to him that another ambush might be placed; and he went on with a confident step, though his keen eyes roved around, ready to take in the very first significant sight.

But that one stroke was all that was attempted. The hours plodded on and the miles slowly dropped away behind him, and at last in the early morning Blazer's Bar lay just below him.

He halted for a moment, looking down on the little town with that curious stare that comes natural to a man returning to his place of residence, even after but a brief absence.

As he looked he started.

From the side of the trail, and but a few yards away, there rose a voice, harsh, rasping and utterly unfamiliar.

"Say, boss, that camp beats Jumptown all holler. Ef yer ain't purty well heeled an' lieberle ter shoot at ther drop ov ther hat, I wouldn't advise yer ter go in. They've did fur me—er so near it thet thar ain't no fun in ther missin' ov it—an' I'm right smart myself. Yer couldn't hev ther omnibus call at ther door, er ther street-cars back up to ther edge ov ther pavement? I'm thet tired thet I don't b'lieve I kin git back ov meself; an' I wouldn't trust nothin' but a public conveyance ter help me."

"Who ther thunder be you?" answered Sam, sharply. He did not like the looks of the man, and as he heard the first sound of his voice the suspicion struck him that it

was barely possible this was his unknown as sailant.

A second glance removed that idea utterly. The man looked as though he had just come out of the spout of a thrashing-machine. He was beaten, bruised and bloody, while the clothing, that had no doubt been dilapidated enough twenty-four hours ago, was in tatters that had been freshly made. Altogether he was disconsolate enough, and there was an air of unconcern about him that awakened enough sympathy to cause the question to be flung at him. And he answered promptly:

"Oh, I'm ther cross-eyed man—the downy cove with ther irregular opticks. I've jest bin run outen Blazer's, an' I'm getherin' strength ter ventur' back. You looks like a good pard ter tie to; say, won't yer lemme go 'long?"

The stranger seemed to be looking at nothing in particular, and Singular Sam would have sworn that he was not looking at him; but after that hint he was not so certain about it. When he came to examine more closely there was a general discursiveness in the man's gaze that was perplexing in the extreme.

"Ther cross-eyed man! I think I've heered ov ye, an' a mighty tough nut yer be. Why did they run yer out of camp? Blazer's are a hard town, but they ginerally give a stranger some show."

"Fur cuttin' a throat—ez they said—an' ef it hedn't bin fur a genooin daisy they'd a-hung me, sure. I'm a-goin' back, ef it's only ter see her. Oh, she's jest a queen, a-sottin' squar' on four aces. Brilliant Bess they call her—mebbe you've heered ov her. Ef not, call at this shop an' git all ther informashun ov ther whitest woman in ther mines."

"Very white; but what had Bess Stanley to do with *you*? Better for you to have been hanged off-hand than to have given the roughs at Blazer's Bar an excuse to work her any harm."

Singular Sam spoke up quick and sharp at the mention of Bess Stanley's name, and for the moment dropped the vernacular, in spite of the fact that it had almost become second nature.

"Don't be ravin', pard. I jedge yer *her* met ther young lady, an' ef so, she's jest hit yer whar yer live. That's all right. Bless yer soul, do I look like a feller ez would want ter introod? I've a wife an' a dozen kids back in ther States—keep a high-toned laundry in ther metropolis ov Bosting, Mass. No, pard, I ain't struck; but I know a white woman when I see her, an' I'll speak a good word fur ye ef I hev ther chance. But come ter think ov it, mebbe I'd better wait a leetle longer an' give 'em time ter cool down after ther howlin' ole time they hed las' night. At las' accounts Gentle Joe war makin' it warm fur 'em—jest red-hot. No; I guess I won't go 'long down, an' I'd ruther take it ez a favor ef you wouldn't menshun a-seein' ov me. Much obleged fur a waitin' on me, but I'll see yer later. An' when Abednego Trinnfador—which are me—tips yer ther wink, jest you lay low fur black ducks. Suthin's ready ter bu'st."

He waved his hand toward Blazer's Bar, and Singular Sam, taking him at his word and without another inquiry, strode rapidly away toward the town in the distance.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER MRS. ORMSBY IN THE FIELD.

THE people of Blazer's Bar were not inclined to hide their light when they set about any such little job as the one they had undertaken.

With them all such affairs were open and above-board, and they wanted all the world that might be interested to know just how the thing had been done.

And to such frolics about all of the Bar was accu-tomed to turn out, unless the affair happened to be entirely impromptu.

Nevertheless, there were a number of the inhabitants who were not witnesses of the proceedings, and among the first people, too.

In the reading-room of the Golden Lamb three persons were seated through nearly the whole of it, without paying the least attention to what was going on without.

The three were engaged in an earnest colloquy, and if, now and then, one of them seemed to turn an ear toward the hum that

would intrude, it was in a mechanical way, and without any apparent interest.

First and foremost, as the one who for the most part held the floor, was Major Widespin, the solid man of the camp.

He had come into Blazer's Bar, and had had astonishing success considering his chances, his luck dating from the time he had accumulated the worked-out mine now known as the Bald Eagle. He had managed to make it pay again; and it was rumored that he had struck a paying lead that had been lost for a hundred years. The Bald Eagle was an old mine that had been abandoned more than once.

He had a good many men working for him, and not one of them ever expressed any particular enthusiasm for his employer. He paid well, his work seemed to go on and if the men from Bald Eagle sometimes spread themselves on the loose through the town, he made it none of his concern.

It was supposed that the major would shoot—he had some sort of a record on bears, Indians, and such—but somehow no one had occasion to crowd him. He never interfered with the rough merry-makers, and with his natty figure, neat clothing and mild manners, was pointed out as a sample good man when strangers were so unfortunate as to find their way to the camp.

Of the other two, one was a gentleman who was evidently a stranger to both the camp and the country. He had seemingly no desire to appear at his best, and his garments really gave some signs of an attempt to tone down their aspect to what he supposed was the Blazer's pitch.

All the same he could not avoid a look of intense respectability; and at a glance almost any one would set him down as a prosperous business man from the East. His cheeks and frame were a trifle bulgy, and his step heavier than was generally to be found among such men in the mining regions, but the smile around his lips did not make one forget the shrewd twinkle in his eyes. The others addressed him as Mr. Cathcart.

The last one of the trio was a woman.

She said little, but listened to the conversation of the trio with an air of the deepest interest. When she did open her lips it was to ask some pertinent question, in a deep, bell-like voice.

The woman had a striking face, if it was not altogether handsome; and though her dress was not one to show it off to the best advantage, her figure was fine enough to command attention anywhere. Now and then she would look at Mr. Cathcart in a hesitating, anxious sort of way, as though she hoped to read in his eyes what he thought of all they had been hearing.

But Mr. Cathcart was far too good a business man to allow any signs of his inmost thoughts to appear on his countenance. He nodded from time to time, or said "yes, yes," in a way that might mean perfect agreement, or just nothing at all.

"Um, yes, I see," he said finally. "It was very fortunate that my correspondents should have suggested that I communicate with you; and it was exceptional good fortune that we found in you a gentleman willing to render us the assistance that happened to be in your power. It shall not be forgotten, sir, it shall not be forgotten. On behalf of Mrs. Ormsby I can say that she is truly thankful; and not only thankful, but hopeful. If we had only come a year sooner."

"Yes, a year sooner would have made all the difference in the world. Of course I do not say that the man cannot be traced since he left the Bald Eagle; but if he was interested in keeping himself unknown there would be a good deal of trouble about it."

"Very true; but the first thing to do is to establish the fact that he was alive one year ago. That, in any event, would be sufficient to justify Mrs. Ormsby in continuing the quest until she either found her husband, or a positive assurance of his death."

Mrs. Ormsby threw up her hand with a little cry.

The sentiment was cold-blooded enough, and Cathcart's tones scarcely put it in a softer light. He continued in the same cold way:

"Between two business men it is not worth while to introduce much sentiment. Fairly and squarely, Major Caton Ormsby was a very great rascal—was worse than a rascal

in fact—and between you and me, I would sooner have dealings with his tombstone than with the man himself. It is typical of the softer sex to forget and forgive, otherwise I have no doubt our friend would join me most heartily. I don't know that anything good can be said of the deceased—if deceased he is—and as we must speak of him we may as well tell the truth. Meantime we have a clew; a point of departure, so to speak. What would you advise?"

Major Widespin pursed up his lips and looked thoughtfully at the woman for a moment before answering.

"If you want to find him I'm not sure but that the best plan would be to advertise the facts in the case. If I know anything about him I should say that the moment he learns that there is wealth waiting for him he will make his appearance. Or if he is dead, and you make it known that there is money to be had for positive information of the fact, some one will be sure to turn up who knows his whole history since he left here."

"I suppose it would hardly do to offer a reward for positive information of his death?"

"Well, scarcely—in this section of the country—unless you mean all that the words imply. If you put the price high enough you would be sure to get the information."

"Um, yes, I see. Of course we do not mean it in that way. Now, is there any one else in the town who would be likely to know anything about the man?"

"That is not so easy to say," responded the major, reflectively.

"There is a chance that one of two men could say something if they would; but they are not the kind to speak. Both of them seemed to know Ormsby—or Caton, as he called himself. Whether they were friends or not I could not say."

"Two men, did you say? And who were they? I must see them."

It was Mrs. Ormsby that spoke, with sudden vehemence, and with the warmest interest she had yet exhibited.

"I wish I knew," the major responded, enigmatically.

"They are both sphinxes. Gentle Joe and Singular Sam are the handles most often used. The first is a confirmed gambler; but a genteel-looking little fellow, who sometimes answers to the name of Lipscombe."

"Describe the men," the lady added, as Widespin stopped speaking.

"You may think me foolish, but something tells me that with one of the two, or with both, I am destined to have a great deal to do. They may be friends, they may prove enemies; but I would know more of them before we meet."

"Pohl" interposed Cathcart. "Do not be afraid of them. Caton has lost his grip on you himself, why should you fear his friends? They cannot harm you, and the chances are a thousand to one that your husband was careful enough not to let them into the fact of your existence."

"I know, I know; but still I must hear. You cannot imagine what I suffered in the past to make me suspicious for the future."

She actually seemed to be going nervous over it, and as the quickest way to soothe her anxiety the major gave her a pretty accurate description of the two men.

Mrs. Ormsby was evidently relieved.

"Thank you," she said, the excitement pretty well out of her voice. "I suppose I am foolish; but I have a presentiment that those men will bring me bad luck. Be careful how you approach them, or mention my name. I hope they have not been apprised of my presence here. I do not care to meet them, and—"

She ceased speaking suddenly. There was a great clamor without, so loud that it had at last forced itself upon their notice. Then, as they looked up to listen, the door was flung open, and Gentle Joe himself sprung into the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

GENTLE JOE TAKES WATER.

RAGGED RUFÉ had looked as though he might be puzzled at the speech of Lipscombe, and there was more of warning in his announcement than he meant; but Joe showed no trouble over the speedy chance that was

given him to carry out his expressed desire. He looked quite calmly at the approaching mob, as if to judge how much time was at his disposal, and then turned to the ragamuffin, in the coolest of ways:

"Old man, you have plenty of nerve, but if it's all the same to you, I would just as soon that you wouldn't be too closely identified with the movement. I'll have about as much as I want to do to take care of my own immortal interest, and if I have you hanging around my skirts I guess I won't know which way to shoot, or how soon to run. I don't generally leave a pard in a hole, and I'm not wanting any pard just now, Sabbe?"

"Kerrect, ef I mou't so observe. Paddle yer own canoe, an' I'll git outen range. I kin see whar yer live, an' thar ain't room fur more. Hyar they be."

The crowd that was approaching held on at a rapid rate until they had about reached a possible revolver range. Then, as they could see that Joe Lipscombe had his hands in his pockets, and was watching them with an air of quiet unconcern, the pace was moderated to a slow walk, that allowed those in the rear to close up. The combination produced quite a respectable bunch.

"Sorry fur it, Joe," said Mart Hammers, who was at the head of the procession. "I don't think myself ez you got inter ther scrape on ther wrong side except frum pure cussedness, but ther boys hes 'bout concluded ez thar must 'a' bin suthin' atwixt you an' him, er yer wouldn't a-chipped on his game, an' they hev decided you hed better pass ther night in meddertashun an' prayin', an' ef he don't turn up afore mornin' they'll try yer on ther gin'al issyer, an' perobably advise yer ter emigrate to onc't."

"Two of us sorry, then. I know you're about as square as they make 'em, and it's a pity to have you mixed up in a racket with such a lot of scrubs as these tough citizens of Blazer's Bar. Suppose you step down and out, and leave me to settle accounts with them. I swear I don't want to hurt you, as I know I'll have to if you stay in front of the ruck."

While he spoke, he ran his eyes critically over the crowd.

Neither Jess Hurley nor the Baby was present, and he did not see Dave Dukely, who was crouching down in the rear of the crowd. He was looking for other faces, too, but the Bar gave him little time to make an itemized bill. His words had cut a little deeper than he imagined, and he had gone so far that apology was no longer possible. The last words had scarcely left his mouth when there was a sharp report, and Lipscombe staggered back.

A yell arose. Every one thought he was hard hit; and the surprise was great when he turned squarely and bounded away. He ran too fast and strong for a badly-injured man, and the supposition was that in his bewilderment he had temporarily lost his sand.

Perhaps he had; but Ragged Rufe, watching him from a safe distance, scratched his head in evident distrust. There must be some object behind this.

So into the reading-room of the Golden Lamb darted Gentle Joe, just as Mrs. Ormsby had announced her unwillingness to see him.

The abrupt entrance brought the three to their feet.

Mrs. Ormsby uttered a short, sharp cry of surprise; Mr. Cathcart glared about him with a look that might mean any one of half a dozen different emotions.

As for Gentle Joe—he sprung into one corner of the room, where he could command the door without being seen from the outside, and with his revolvers out and the everlasting silken smile on his face, watched for the approach of his enemies without more than a hasty glance at the trio in the room. Either he was strangely reckless, or he felt pretty well assured that they would prefer looking after their own safety to bothering with him.

If the latter was his supposition events showed that he was not far wrong. Mr. Cathcart's hesitation was only momentary. With more quickness than one would have expected from his build and general appearance, he caught Mrs. Ormsby around the waist and swung her out of the line between Gentle Joe's corner and the door, and toward the window. Then he threw up the

sash, and in another moment would have had her out of the room, had she not broken away from him and stared at the little man with the two revolvers, who had suddenly flung up his hand and taken a snap shot at the first head that had rather cautiously been thrust into the room.

Above the echo of the report of the revolver there rose a snarling cry, that showed some one had been hit, and then Mrs. Ormsby, dropping her hand on the shoulder of the major, who had by this time moved to her side, whispered into his ear:

"Why did you not tell me the whole truth? That man there is my husband. For Heaven's sake hide me from him. If he sees me he will kill me."

The major was as cool as the veriest fire-eater, yet he looked at the door in some perplexity. Certainly his range of vision was as extensive as was that of Mrs. Ormsby, yet he saw no one there at all. He shook his head.

"You are mistaken. Do not be alarmed. No one shall harm you—provided we once get out of this corner. Here! Cathcart is outside, let me pass you out to him. The best of us get out of range when the bullets begin to fly."

He was keeping extra cool on her account, and his words had some effect; but she refused to move. On the contrary, she pushed back a step, and, risking the very thing she had appeared anxious to avoid, pointed at Gentle Joe.

"No, I am not mistaken—nor have you been, either. Yonder is the man I mean—Caton Ormsby."

"Then there are two of a kind, for that man is not the one who told me the history that answers so exactly to your description. That is Joe Lipscombe, a gambler, a sport, a 'bad man' in our parlance, but not such a style of badness as you have been telling me of. But come now. Rest assured that he can be found when you want him, and the band will not refrain much longer from striking up out of deference to you." And as if in echo the chorus arose outside:

"You in there, we're after Gentle Joe, an' we mean ter hev him, but we don't want ter do ary damage to outsiders. We've got ther winders kivered, an' ther fu'st head that pokes outside ov ther door without a pair ov empty hands in front ov it gets a chunk of lead in it. Ef thar's a lady thar we want her ter hev a show ter git outen range, but we ain't waitin' very long."

The truce was perhaps as much of a necessity as of generosity. As Lipscombe commanded the avenue in, and the crowd the way out, a parley was naturally in order. The presence of Mrs. Ormsby was a convenient excuse, and while she was getting out of the way it might be possible to get the drop on the reckless little gambler.

The major saw the points in the game, and as he was interested for himself, and had no apparent bias for either side, he answered the spokesman without, in his own particular interest.

"Don't be foolish with your irons. I guess if you promise Joe a fair show he will come out and reason with you; but any way you don't want to hurt us. The lady is a little wild, as she is a stranger, and not accustomed to the style of business at the Bar. Give me a moment more and I will get her out of harm's way."

"Thanks," said Mr. Lipscombe from his corner. "That is just what I was going to suggest. There is a prospect for a lively time here, and the sooner the kitchen is cleared the sooner the full orchestra can strike up. Escort the lady out, I will hold my hand till she is out of range, and if I am not greatly deceived as to the chivalry of Blazer's it will do likewise."

Of course he had not heard the wild statement of Mrs. Ormsby, and he had only favored her with a glance, that certainly gave no sign of recognition. He did not seem to dream that she did not want to go.

Then the lady moved; but toward the corner of the room, and not toward the door. She held out her hand as she advanced.

"Caton Ormsby, is this the way I find you?"

There could not be the shadow of a doubt in regard to her meaning, and Lipscombe looked at her with a queer jerk of the head,

and the everlasting smile deepened on his face.

"What name was that your gracious highness was pleased to observe? It is a strange one to me and unless I hear it again I am afraid I may totally forget it."

"If you would deny your own name no doubt you would deny me. Both should be familiar enough. You ruined the one and well-nigh killed the other. You are in the usual desperate strait now, and yet it would be a safe wager that you will escape as usual and go out into the world to find more victims to sacrifice."

"I can't say that I exactly sabbe, but no doubt you intend to insinuate that you are one of my boyhood friends. Don't be too rash about any such statements, fer I am a good deal older than I look, and there's no use to give yourself away fer nothing. I've a tolerably strong memory, madam, and a thorough regard for the truth. Hating to hurt your feelings, all the same, truth compels me to say I never set eyes on you before in all my life."

The woman uttered a short, unpleasant laugh.

"I knew it, without understanding how he could hurt or harm he would deny me on the gen'ral principle. Were it not for the child no such chance would I give him. For her sake I can be brave, even to once more risking my life in his hands."

She held up both hands, and looked around over her shoulder at the major in an appealing way. Evidently she wanted him to speak, to reassure her.

The major shook his head. He desired to postpone the consideration of these subjects until a more convenient season. He could not well leave a woman in the lurch; but after the warning she had it was certainly time for them to be going. He heard the impatient growls that were beginning to rise outside; and was decidedly inclined to believe that the woman was a little demented.

He looked from one to the other in a critical way, his lips opened, and he was evidently about to make some pertinent observation, when there was a sudden change in the status of affairs. Without warning Lipscombe threw himself backward against the wall, and then, in some way, not so clear, suddenly and entirely disappeared, just as the crowd came roaring in.

CHAPTER IX.

RAGGED RUFÉ MEETS AN OLD FRIEND.

"Be moderate, gentlemen; be moderate."

The major spoke very quietly. He knew what sort of a crowd he had to deal with; how many friends he had in it; and had no desire to turn the fickle wrath of the balance against himself by an unguarded course of action. If he could call attention to the lady in the case it was possible that the proceedings would not so deeply shock decorum as they otherwise might do. As yet he had no idea that Gentle Joe had made good his escape.

"Moderate, thunder! We've got ther king-pin ov ther gang on a string at last!" snorted the foremost man. "Whar is he? Which way did he go?" he added, when, after looking sharply around there was no trace of Lipscombe to be seen.

The major was not the kind of man to be drawn into the concerns of others unless he could not help it. He said nothing as the room rapidly filled up; but watched the door keenly for a chance to make his exit. He would have perhaps tried the window but for the warning he had received—of course taking Mrs. Ormsby with him. He gave her a warning "hush," and pressed her arm slightly with his hand. As keen as she had shown herself to be there was no doubt in his mind that she would take the hint. There never was a more surprised man than he was when she suddenly sprung forward, giving no further attention to him, nor care to herself.

"Here, this way!" she exclaimed. "If it is Gentle Joe that you are in search of you can find him if you make speed. Break down the partition, quick, before he has time to get away. There is some secret door there, but waste no time in trying to find it; Down with the wall, I say, and you will have him!"

She beat against the wall with her white, naked hands, as she spoke; and her words

were greeted with a cheer. No one stopped to inquire who she was. She was leading them against Joe Lipscombe; and at that minute that was enough. There was a rush, a crash, and then a section of the wall went down, revealing behind it a narrow, hidden passage, at the end of which was a stairway, that evidently extended to the floor above.

Into the passage a dozen men struggled, forgetful of the fact that as against the first comers the revolvers of Gentle Joe could hold the place, if he chose to run the risk.

The cooler ones probably counted on some such move, but they and the rest were doomed to disappointment; since the way was open and the little gambler had vanished.

Mrs. Ormsby, instead of being terrified by the confusion, was in the lead, and darted up the stairs.

Above was a loft rather than a story, and an open window at the gable end suggested how Lipscombe might have made his way to the ground. Looking out through the window frame, Mrs. Ormsby caught sight of a man speeding away at a great rate, and had not a doubt but that it was the one she had just claimed as her husband. She pointed out the flitting figure, and though she had decided to give up the chase herself, now that she had had time for a little cool reflection, she had the satisfaction of seeing a goodly portion of the town go streaming away in chase, and of hearing a few scattering shots, that told that they were as willing to take him dead as alive. When pursuers and pursued had been swallowed up in the darkness she left the loft and made the best of her way back to the room she had lately left.

The citizens generally had deserted it, and the only persons there were the two with whom she had been holding a conference, and Andy Byles, the well-known and universally popular landlord.

The latter had just been expressing his surprise at the prominent position his guest had taken, and the belief that she must be a little off her base.

"And if she was who could blame her?" indignantly asked Mr. Cathcart, who had come around by the door as soon as the crowd had left an open road. "Few women could have stood the terrible strain under which she has been placed for the last few years. Yet she is sane as the sanest; as that renegade husband will yet find out to his sorrow."

"You don't mean to say that you believe that Lipscombe is the man for whom she is in search?"

The major seemed more surprised at the credence given by Cathcart than at the charge itself, when it was made.

"I have had occasion to investigate a good many of her statements that seemed more improbable than this, and I have always found that she made no mistakes. Until I have some evidence to the contrary I shall continue to believe that Mrs. Ormsby is able to identify her own husband."

The positive way that he spoke had its influence. The major rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as though trying to reconcile this with what he had already known—and evidently he felt like giving up the job. Before he had made any answer Mrs. Ormsby had returned.

Mr. Cathcart looked curiously at her.

"If it will not interfere with your plans to answer, might I take the liberty of asking why you were so foolish as to show your hand? If you were right in naming him, then you have only made your enemy more deadly; if you were wrong, you have gone far toward ruining your case in advance. What credence do you suppose the world will place in your statements whenever Major Widespin begins to doubt?"

"What is the world to me? You believe in me; and if Major Widespin loses faith, he does it at his peril. I am here to stay until the last shred of mystery is torn away and I have found both justice and vengeance."

She straightened herself up as she spoke and darted a keen look at the major, who started under her burning gaze and the unnamed threat of her words.

"That's ther way ter talk ter him," chuckled a voice at the window. "Blazer's Bar are in fur a holy picnic, an' yer can't hold back ther fun. May's well keep up your end. Ther town hez gone wild sence

they found Sing'lar Sam's daisy a-missin' an' blood on ther floor. It looks ez though Brillyunt Bess wouldn't sparkle 'round ther camp fur sum time ter come."

"What's that?" exclaimed the major, springing toward the aperture, when Ragged Rufe's evil face appeared.

"Ther daisy are gone, an' ther camp are settin' up pistols all 'round. Don't yer hear 'em jingle?"

He held up his dirty paw, and from the distance came the sound of a dozen revolver-shots. There was fun in progress somewhere near, and his explanation of it was as reasonable, at least, as none at all; and seeing that he had produced an effect, he thrust his face fairly into the room, and continued:

"Ef Gentle Joe hedn't a hand in it, w'ich I don't say he had, ther Bar are ther furdest off ov ary crowd yer ever see'd, an' when they ketch him, onless ther rope breaks, there'll be bloody murder."

CHAPTER X.

A SPOUTCH OF BLOOD.

ALTHOUGH only a few seconds had elapsed from the time that Gentle Joe sprung through the doorway until his disappearance was known on the outside, the eyes of every one must have been directed toward the wrong spot, since no one saw him make his exit from the building. When a running man made his appearance in the distance, the uncertainly seen figure was taken for that of Lipscombe, and a pursuit immediately began.

As the crowd went streaming by the shanty of Singular Sam, it was only the very last man of all that heard a smothered cry, and he did not at once stop. The fun was all ahead, and he had gone a dozen yards before he was struck with the idea that there might be something going on that needed investigation. He halted then, and turned around with his face toward the building, just as a clearer cry rung out on the night air.

As yet he could see nothing, but he had no longer any doubt.

"Ho, thar, pards!" he shouted. "Hyar's yer gamel! Ther way, some on yer; thar's biz w'uth this sein'—a snag game ov some kind. Sail in, you Blazers!"

He only checked his spring for a moment, but that time seemed to have been used to good advantage, since, when half a dozen of the men that had answered to his call had reached the other side of the shanty—the spot where the cry had seemed to arise—no one was to be seen.

"It war a woman's yell, that," said Copper Carl, as he peered around. "I'm a-bettin' it war ther daisy thet stood us off, a bit ago at ther p'int of her revolver. Ef thar's ary one in Blazer's ez hez gone ter git even fur thet bit ov foolishness, hyar's one ez sez string him up. We don't want no gerloots hyar ez kin hold spite ag'in' a woman like Bess."

"Thet's so. Try ther lay-out. 'Mebbe it ain't ez bad ez yer think, an' mebbe it's wuss. See ef ther daisy are at home."

Without stopping to consider whether their intrusion might prove acceptable, half a dozen men rushed into the shanty, splintering the locked door as they went.

She was not there, and they went out again as hastily as they had entered.

"Dog-gone my cats!" exclaimed Copper Carl, "I b'lieve it's all part ov thersame job. Ef yer find ther daisy you'll find Gentle Joe an' his pard not fur off. Whar's ther Creeper? Hold on, thar! Don't over-run ther trail till he hez a squint at it. Bet yer life he kin tell who hed a hand in it; an' ef he don't say ther fu'st letter of his name are Joe Lipscombe, I'll eat snakes."

The Creeper was so well known in camp that the suggestion was greeted with a howl of approbation. A Mexican he was, who could take up any trail that could be shown to him, and follow it to the end. By chance he was there, and he came forward at the mention of his name.

"Where did they stand when thou heard'st the cry? But show me that, or the mark of a footstep, and leave things as they are, and I lead to them. Ah, stand back!"

He spread out his arms, as some of the more thoughtless or self-sufficient would have rushed past, and his words were taken up by others. In a moment he had the field to himself.

Before he had gone many steps the trailer found something that attracted his attention. He halted, stooped down, and in spite of the wavering nature of the moonlight, seemed to have made a discovery.

"What is it?" yelled half a score of voices.

"Blood," was the cold answer. "Blood, and plenty of it. Here the footsteps begin, and yonder they go—whither, in this darkness, who can follow?"

When so expert a man as he acknowledged himself at fault, what chance was there for any of the rest to do better? They cared no more for his caution, and crowded up to see what it was that he had been examining. A little circle formed, with heads turned in to a center, where, on the ground, was a dark splotch. No foot-prints, no other sign; but that was enough to mark some desperate deed.

And while a dozen men were huddled together, seeing little, but suspecting a great deal, there came a single pistol-shot, that cut from the fingers of Copper Carl the match he had just ignited, and then by chance, as it seemed, burying itself in the ground without further damage.

The shot broke the spell, and up leaped the dozen, all facing toward the spot whence it came. Every man had a weapon handy; and as Blazer's Bar was populated chiefly by experts, there was a unanimous answer. This was the rattle of fire-arms heard by the listeners at the Golden Lamb.

The bullets went spat, spat, against a neighboring shanty, but no answer came; and when the men of the Bar had rushed headlong to the spot, they found no one there. Whoever the reckless fire-eater was, he had managed to make good his escape. Pursuit was impossible, since there was no one to pursue; and while the crowd stood there, sullenly venting its spleen against the unknown marksman, it was joined by the other crowd, returning empty-handed from the chase of Gentle Joe. In the advance came Hurley and the Baby.

"No use ter waste time on sich a weasel ez that," growled the Baby, sulkily, and as if ashamed of his want of success. "He's struck kiver, an' ther's no chance ter roust him out afore mornin', ef we kin git onto his trail then. What's bin a-goin' on hyar? Hes Joe got away with ther crowd?"

"You bet he's got erway with it. An' it ain't more ner half doubtful but he's got erway with suthin' else. Didn't yer hear ther racket? Bess Stanley are missin', an' it looks as tho' there hed bin murder done."

Copper Carl came to the front as he spoke, and stared in a sulky way at all of these men, who had been ramping around to so little purpose.

The late arrivals showed more sign of excitement than those who had been first to know of the trouble at Singular Sam's, and the Baby and Hurley were not the kind to stand there in helpless inaction. At this intelligence they sprung forward.

"Show us ther spot, an' put us on ther trail. This time I sw'ar we won't kim back 'thout suthin' ter show fur it. Ther cussed bound bez doubled back an' got in his work. He wa'n't hangin' onter ther skirts ov Bess 'thout hev'in' a object. It's cl'ar ez day. Help hyar."

The two pards meant business, as they always did when there was anything going on in camp that called for work. Bad, they might be; but when there was need of some one to stir Blazer's Bar up to its duty, the Baby and Jess Hurley were always around. Whether it was hanging a cripple, or going to the rescue of Bess Stanley, was all the same to them. They might, perhaps, be willing to cut a throat or two themselves, but that did not interfere with their regard for the welfare of the public.

Copper Carl shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He was not a friend of either of the two men, and if he made any derogatory remarks, they would hardly be noticed by the bystanders. He did growl out something about "having the wrong pig by the ear," but no one paid any attention. In the briefest time Hurley had brought order out of chaos, and was moving swiftly away, following the probable line of retreat of the unknown marksman, and taking half the town with him.

Then the creeper looked up at Copper Carl.

"A fool or a cheat, it is all the same. No trailer can follow now."

"You bet not!" responded Carl, vigorously. "An' mebbe it's part ov ther game."

CHAPTER XI.

TAKEN.

BESS STANLEY had had her own unpleasant experiences in Blazer's Bar before this, but it was not the fault of the citizens. She was too popular to be willfully offended; and even a stranger would feel like an old-time friend after the first glance at her fresh young face.

Probably if she had shown her hand in favor of the stranger before matters had gone so far she could have at least secured him a more deliberate hearing, if not an acquittal altogether. The trouble was, then, that the Bar wanted to be led and not bluffed. There was no time for the former, and it seemed to her that she had failed most signally in the latter. When the prisoner had been dragged away by the mob, and she recovered a little from the shock of the proceedings, she closed and locked the door behind her, and followed quietly and at a distance. She had no intention now of interfering unless she saw that there was a more favorable opportunity.

The unpleasantness between Gentle Joe and the others gave that opportunity. She saw it begin with some surprise, for it seemed to be, without a doubt, in the interest of the captive.

The latter would perhaps have idly remained watching the affray until it was too late to utilize it had she not attracted his attention.

With some care she approached the outside of the ring of spectators, and waited till she had an opportunity. Then she gave a low hiss. The prisoner's head turned toward her, though his glance seemed to reach toward the four points of the compass. Her little finger was beckoning him, though; and he saw his chance. To her great satisfaction he coolly began to edge his way out of the crowd.

At that Bess fell back, looking from time to time over her shoulder to make sure that he followed. It was possible that he might find it convenient to go in some other direction. Instead, he kept right in her wake, with now and then a reassuring nod. He was a great deal more unconcerned than she was over his danger.

The little game of fisticuffs only occupied a few moments; but as those minutes were all turned to good account the stranger was well out of the throng some time before the blow was delivered that sent Joe Lipscombe "west-end crooked." Bess Stanley led the way, and she was shrewd enough to turn behind cover at the first available opportunity. Then she waited until the man could overtake her.

He came along, strolling carelessly—not at all like one around whose neck the rope had been already knotted. When he had once got outside of the glare of the fire near the Golden Lamb he became almost unrecognizable.

He sauntered slowly up to Brilliant Bess, and in his voice there was not the first token of care or caution.

"It's all right, leetle woman. Yer wants ter talk to me; but this ain't ther time ner place. I reckon I want a leetle cleanin' up afore I'll be fit fur ladies' sersiety; an' jist now I've got big biz somewhere else. By-by, I'll ondoubtedly see yer later."

"Hush, speak lower! I must have a talk with you *now*. Follow me, please. There are a few words you *must* say. Then you can go your way—to death, for what I care. I'll be frank with you; I think when I took your part against all Blazer's I earned the right."

"I ken jedge jest what yer a-achin' ter say, but ef I war you I wouldn't say it. This hyar ain't ther time ter fool 'round askin' conundrums. I kin tell yer one thing squar', when yer git honest help outen Sing'lar Sam ther time hes come ter draw blood from a turnip. Yer can't trust him; yer won't trust me; an' ther balance ov human mankind are perty much all frauds. Fur ther good turn yer hev did me I kin only give yer a word ov advice. Don't trust nobody, an' yerself least ov all. Give my love ter ther Bar; an' tell 'em I've lit out."

Then the man in some mysterious way renewed his strength. Without waiting for

answer or further inquiry he darted away into the darkness, and left the girl full of surprise and anger. After all she had done for him it seemed to her that she deserved better treatment.

Yet there was something about his indefinite advice that struck a responsive chord in her mind. She allowed him to go his way. To tell the truth she could do nothing else—and slowly and thoughtfully went back toward the cabin.

As she went she was trying to fit it all together.

"At least I have helped to save his life; and I will have the chance to some day meet him again. Yet—if I am not mistaken in the man—how many months have I been vainly looking for him; how many more may elapse before he will a second time cross my path! I should have held him at the muzzle of my revolver—should have forced the full truth from between his lying lips. Ah, he told me one thing at least, that was the truth. Trust myself least of all! True. After thus mismanaging the chance of one's lifetime what confidence can one have for the future?"

She was speaking to herself, and if her words were low they were audible, though she did not know it. She was more than startled to hear a voice at her elbow:

"I wouldn't worry 'bout it, leetle woman. Thar aint the slightest use. All the feathers you c'd 'a' picked off'n that rooster wouldn't 'a' made much to 'ard a small-sized piller. Ef yer hed raised a racket ther crowd w'd 'a' come an' hanged him—er ef yer hed shot, how much c'd yer 'a' got outen ther corpus. He's fly ter them p'int ov ther game, an' he'll take his chances every time. Take old Ragged Rufe's advice, an' let sich biz fur Sing'lar Sam ter follow. An' I reckon he won't go much furdur than whar you left off."

"Who are *you*?" retorted Bess, sharply.

In an easy way, that betokened familiarity with weapons, she threw up her hands—and Ragged Rufe could perceive that he was covered.

"Oh, I'm nothin' but a durned ole tramp, layin' round Blazer's, fur what I kin make. I reely ain't wuth ther shootin' an' it wouldn't do you no good ter pull. Put up yer weepins, an' pass on. It war only a leetle collat'ral infurmashun ez I were a-chuckin' in, an' ef it don't seem ter hit yer whar yer live I won't do so no more. Pass on, an' I'll git back ter kiver. It's a discouragin' sorter night fur honest folks ter be abroad."

"Ah, you are the drunken brute known as Ragged Rufe—one of Gentle Joe's adherents. If you are not as bad as your master it is because you have had less brains. You have not come to me without a purpose; and I can vow, even without knowing, that the purpose is a bad one. Keep clear of me, I do not care to have your blood on my hands; but I warn you that it will stain them if you interfere. What Singular Sam might do if he knew how you had slandered him I leave for you to find out. Perhaps you can guess."

"Mebbe, mebbe," retorted the bumner, with a wave of his hand. "It ain't wuth while ter discuss it. All the same, ef Sam ain't a-howlin' when he finds yer stood in atwixt Abednego an' ther rope, you kin jist play me fur a flat, an' make ther raffle every time."

"Who did you say? What name was that?"

"Abednego Trinnfador. Yer see ther old coon ain't quite ez dumb ez he looks. He kin tell a thing or two ef he loosens up ther guy-ropes ter his jawin'-tackle. Mighty good name, that; an' ther owner ov it—oh, but he's a daisy."

"Abednego Trinnfador! 'Tis a strange name to me—one that I never heard before. How comes it that it comes so patty to your lips and my ears?"

"Oh, he war an ole side pard ov mine. Bully ole hustlers was we. Don't do ter talk 'bout them ole times; but red-hot they was, an' still a-heatin' when we d'solved. Hain't seen him sence till he struck ther Bar. Sorry he skipped. Me an' him orter had a long palaver. Thar's gold an' blood in ther wind, an' we're dead sure ter git one er t'other. That's all, leetle woman. On'y wanted ter gi'n yer a pointer ter show we wa'n't quite dead yet. By by; methinks Joe

hez skipped by this time, an' I'll meander back ter ther Golden Lamb. Thar's a party thar I'd reely like ter see ter-night—a woman. She looks ez though she war a tin angel on wheels. Go fur her in ther mornin'. She kin give yer a p'int or two an' not half try. So long."

Although all the time Bess held the revolver in her hand, the bumner seemed perfectly unconscious of its presence, and he went away without leave or license.

The girl did not attempt to stop him, though, if the slight hesitation in his swagger meant anything, it showed that he expected a recall.

Probably she did not, in cold blood care to open an interview then and there with so disreputable looking an object. Besides, from the willingness displayed it seemed likely that he rather desired to hear himself talk; and much more than likely that he knew nothing, and would not tell the truth if he could.

One thing, however, struck Bess Stanley; and that was, the presence of a lady traveler at the Golden Lamb. If the words of Ragged Rufe could be relied on, this stranger had some connection with her affairs. Who she might be became at once an object of interest. In spite of the boisterous crowd around the hotel she turned her face in that direction, and took perhaps a dozen steps.

Then—an arm of steel went around her waist; a hand was pressed over her mouth. She was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XII.

A MAN OF KNOWLEDGE.

THE voice at the window certainly produced an electric effect. Major Widespin hung on Ragged Rufe's utterances with breathless interest, while Mrs. Ormsby appeared to be strangely moved; Mr. Cathcart leaning back, coolly listened; and if the satisfied smile on his face went for anything he was very well pleased with what he saw and heard. As his eyes were fixed on the lady, the deeper tones of the major did not drown, for his ears, her little cry. After that, had she wished it, she could not have concealed her agitation.

She did not attempt it. On the contrary, when Ragged Rufe had ceased speaking she had bounded across the floor, and stood peering out of the window.

"That voice! Speak! Let me hear it again. Is it indeed Rufus Primrose?"

"That same sweet-scented flower ov ther evenin', mum; which no doubt are a surprise. Shake, ole lady; er, ef it's too much trouble, I'll come inside. Mebbe, ef it ain't askin' too much yer could wring me in on yer frierds. Sence Gentle Joe hez absquatulated it'll be necessary fur me ter find a friend with capital; I'm clean gone broke meself. Hole on a bit; I'll be thar. Know'd yer wouldn't go back on *me*."

He disappeared from the window; only to enter the room a moment later.

Mrs. Ormsby had not moved from the position in which he had left her. She looked up with a haggard expression on her face; but without a word, as the bumner rolled forward with one very dirty paw extended.

"Don't s'pose it's wuth while ter say 'Come ter me arms, ole gal;' but fur ther sake ov ole times, I kin resk it ter say, 'Shake, pard, shake!' Yer does me proud ter recognize me, when I'm down at ther heel."

The door slamming sharply on the departing major interfered somewhat with the answer. The two looked in that direction, and Mrs. Ormsby was recalled to the fact that this interruption was peculiarly *inapropos*. Without a doubt, it increased the anger that was taking the place of surprise.

"You vagabond of the world! you thief beyond redemption! you scoundrel without a decent trait! what, of all places, are you doing here? Have you not worked enough harm without coming here to finish with my utter ruin?"

Rufe looked at her as she rolled forth this tirade, and his hands were uplifted and his eyes opened to their widest extent. He looked the picture of innocent surprise.

"Oh, say, give us a rest on that! I thort yer war bu'stin' with glory at a-seein' ov me, er I wouldn't hev introoded. Ther very sound ov Primrose war once music to yer years—an' now yer talks like that. All

right; I'm a-goin'. Heven't nothin' more ter say."

He turned, and then looked back over his shoulder. Mrs. Ormsby was glowering at him in no very amiable way, while the face of Mr. Cathcart wore a smile of amusement. Neither cared to stop him.

"It's jest ez well," the bummer continued, after a moment's hesitation. "Yer ain't a bit curious, an' ef yer war, that's all ther good it would do. I'm used ter ongratitude, an' I ain't a-blamin' yer fur givin' the grand bounce. I don't, as it were, keer a continental, an' I've jest one word ov advice. Ef yer knows wot's good fur yer everlastin' health an' happiness, you'll git afore ther time ov trouble hes above. Ef not, look out fur squalls. Ebernezer's on ther way, an' when he comes—thar's trouble afoot."

With this parting shot, that did not seem to go very wide of its mark, Ragged Rufe vanished, leaving the two to their own society.

For a moment both were silent, Mr. Cathcart fondling his mustache, under which was lurking an oily smile.

The woman was sitting with her head bowed on her hands, and when at last he spoke to her, she looked up with a wild sort of stare.

"It does seem to me that the menagerie at Blazer's Bar would fill out a complete cargo for Noah's Ark. If there is anything of fur or feather wanting, if you wait long enough I'll wager it will turn up here. But is this chance, or what brought them all together here?"

"Chance? No, it is fate!" responded Mrs. Ormsby, moodily. "The fight is to come right here—so be it. When we leave the Bar, if leave it we do, there will at least be nothing more to learn."

"And this Bess Stanley, of whom we have incidentally heard—who is she? Is there a girl of her age who, by any possibility, might be mixed up in the affair? When you begin your explanations, you may as well include them all. Here are two or three already, of whom I had never heard; and yet they seem to have an important connection with the story. This man of rags, for instance—who is he?"

"He has nothing to do with the matter," responded the woman, hastily. "He is a drunken, worthless brute, whom I knew slightly years ago, before he had fallen so low."

"Primrose, I believe he called himself. Odd name, that, yet it seems to me it's not altogether unfamiliar. Is—he a relative of yours?"

"That is a question I refuse to answer. Of all the needed points in my life, I have given you a full history. For the rest, I prefer to keep silent."

"Just as you choose—just as you choose. I believe I have a sure indemnity against possible loss, and a rare chance for large remuneration. I rather prefer the latter view of the case; but I can be content with the former. What next? It is best that we should consider what we have learned here, and decide upon our best course. There is no time to lose."

"I shall talk no more to-night; I want rest, and a chance to think it all over. There are some things here that I cannot understand, and I believe I have made a fool of myself to-night in more ways than one."

"In regard to Gentle Joe, I should say you had; and I rather suspect that it would have been as well to have deferred the recognition of the ragged Primrose until a more appropriate season. Still, I do not despair of ultimate success, and if you have nothing to suggest you may as well retire to your room. The hour is growing late, and I would like to have some further talk with the major, if he is to be found."

"Go, then, but beware. There may be a dozen lying in wait for you at the nearest corner, and twice as many willing to shed your blood for the wealth they imagine is in your pockets. It would be safer if you did not stir outside of this place save by daylight."

"Thanks for the warning, but I am able to take care of myself. I have been in worse places than Blazer's Bar, and I came out unharmed. It's a little way I have. Don't let me keep you any longer. I will see you in the morning, and I have no doubt I will

have something interesting to relate. You are not to be trusted to run matters; and I will have to take hold in earnest myself. Good-night."

Mrs. Ormsby did not even glance in his direction as he went out, closing the door easily and carefully behind him.

Perhaps she understood him better than he thought she did. Further expostulation would only have been so much lost time and breath. He did go down the street a few rods, but with no evident purpose in view. He loitered around in an aimless way for a few moments, and then silently returned, slipping into his own little six by nine cubby-hole of a room without any one being the wiser.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. CATHCART HOLDS A LEVEE.

It was rather late in the morning when Mr. Cathcart made his reappearance, and he came blinking, and rubbing his eyes, as though he had been unwillingly roused from his slumbers.

As a matter of habit he steered first of all into the bar-room.

Mr. Byles greeted him with a cordial good-morning. The worthy proprietor had his own share of curiosity, and was shrewd as they made them. If he had hold of the small end of a mystery it was one that paid him, and he did not intend to drive trade away.

"Hyar's yer hammer, an' thar's yer nail," he continued, setting a glass and a little black bottle on the bar. "Drive her in. You'll find it the extra sort, ez I brought it along fur my own private use. Not enough brimstone an' akyfortis fer ther av'ridge run ov ther boys, but ile an' honey fur a kerrect taste—like yourn."

Mr. Byles was not far off of the truth in what he said, either. Cathcart, after a momentary hesitation, sampled the hardware, and set his tumbler back with a sigh of relief.

"Better than I could have dreamed of, sir, better than I could have dreamed of. Opens a man's eyes wide, sir, very wide, and gets him ready for breakfast. Has Mrs. Ormsby shown up yet?"

"Haven't seen hide ner huff sence ther leetle confab in ther parlor. Guess ther ride war too much fur her yesterday, an' she'll hev ter hev her own time for shakin' it off. Very fine woman, but looks ez tho' she'd hed lots ov trouble. Anything special?"

"As you say, sir, lots of trouble; though I hope she is about through with it. We have come here to obtain final proofs of several things which, when they are settled, will make her immensely wealthy—a millionaire in fact. Perhaps, from what you have heard let fall, you may alr ady have some idea of the facts in the case."

"Excuse me. A man thet keeps a hotel, which the same are worthy ov ther name, hears nothin'. What might be remarked on in confidence—that's a different thing. An' ef I could advise—I've bin hyar sence Blazer war a baby."

Mr. Cathcart did not immediately respond. He looked Byles in the face in a critical sort of way, and seemed to be revolving a question in his own mind. When at last he spoke it was in an altered, confidential tone.

"There is a great deal in what you say, Mr. Byles, and I thank you cordially for your generous offer. If I do not take advantage of it at once it is because Mrs. Ormsby insists upon managing her own affairs. Nevertheless I think she and I are generally of the same way of thinking, and if she takes the view of matters that I hope she will I would like you to meet us in conference immediately after breakfast, and before the major makes his appearance. As I judge that we have not much time to spare would you have the kindness to have some one rap on Mrs. Ormsby's door and tell her that I am waiting for her?"

"Guess ye'r 'bout right. They're savin' up fur ye; but ther boys hev mostly shoveled up the'r grub an' left. Hold on a minnit an' I'll see."

Byles was gone but a moment; when he returned his face was the picture of astonishment.

"I sw'ar I dunno what ter make of it," was his ejaculation. "It's awful."

"What do you mean?" asked Cathcart, sharply.

"Miss Ormsby—she—she ain't thar."

"Not where?"

"In her room. Don't look ez though she's bin thar all night. Suthin's happened."

That was enough. Without stopping to ask further questions Mr. Cathcart dashed past the landlord and down the narrow little hallway. Fortunately the bar-room at that moment was deserted, or he would have created considerable excitement by his abrupt departure, and Andy Byles would have led along a murderous delegation, as he darted in the rear.

The two men stared into the little closet that was, by courtesy, styled a room.

It looked too completely undisturbed not to be suggestive. The feminine fixings were all there, just as they had been laid down, the bed was untouched, and the little window was wide open.

"She couldn't 'a' crawled out ther winder ter take a promenade," queried the landlord, in a hopeless sort of way.

"Crawl—blazes! She has been carried out. There was foul play of some kind. Were you in it?"

The cold, concentrated manner of Mr. Cathcart made Andy's flesh crawl. From that moment he had more respect for his guest than he had ever had before.

"Pon my sacred word! Ax the people ov Blazer's what Andy Byles's word are wu'th, an' they'll all tell ye he's square ez a die. I don't know more ner you do—not ez much. An' who would 'a' kerried her away? Thar ain't no man at Blazer's Bar ez would run sich reesk."

"How about the girl that was missing last night? Has she turned up?"

The question was a poser. Bess Stanley had not turned up, and the Bar was sufficiently excited about her. What might not be said if another woman was missing and from the Golden Lamb?

"But nobody could 'a' took her without givin' some sort ov sign. It must be a mistake. Look around a leetle. You'll find her takin' in ther Bar. It ain't in a woman to be snoozin' round while she hez any kind ov a contract on hand. No use to be skeered; but it's jest ez well ter hunt her up."

Andy made a dive for the door, as if to lead the search, but Mr. Cathcart held out his hand and stopped him.

"No. If she has gone of her own accord, she will come back by the way she left. If, as I believe, she was taken away, then the best plan will be to wait. Whoever the men who did it, they will show their hands if you give them time. After that perhaps brains will tell. This thing has not been done without a reason; and it may well be worth a million to know who the abductors are."

"You talk right down to ther line, pard, an' mebbe you won't hev ter wait ez long ez Andy thinks ter find out."

The two men started, though to one of them the voice was familiar enough. Turning, they saw Singular Sam standing in the door.

"By mighty, I b'lieve ye'r right; an' glad be I ter sec yer, Sam. Hyar's ther man fur a side pard. What he don't know ain't wu'th thinkin' 'bout, an' ther sooner yer let him in on ther ground floor ther sooner it'll git cleared up what it's all about. I've an interest in this thing, Sam; an' I want yer ter count Mr. Cathcart in, an' take hold ez ef yer meant it. Ef there hes been anything snide at ther Golden Lamb it's got ter be squared er me reputashun's gone."

"All right, Terry. We know you hadn't any hand in it; and I came right hyer ter see ef you couldn't give me some points on who did. If the gentleman means business, I've no objection to having our horses pull together. Let's take this thing up right now. What do you think has become of Bess?"

Singular Sam did not belie his name. Evidently he knew all about the disappearance of Brilliant Bess; but he was as cool as though it was none of his funeral that was under discussion.

"Now you talk," said Byles, with positive enthusiasm in his voice.

"Thet settles ther job, Mr. Cathcart. You hev Sing'lar Sam on your side, an' he'll pull yer through ag'in' all ther toughs an' road-agents thet ever bloomed 'round Blazers. Give him ther points, an' we'll hustle things along lively."

"Yes, give me ther p'int. Ef we kin make a double team all ther better fur us,

and all ther worse fur some one else; but say it short, an' say it solid. I ain't much time fur foolin'. You, Byles, jest give me what's bin goin' on hyar, an' how Bess kin ter be mixed up in this hangin' scrape, an' jest who war bossin' that job. Mebbe I kin see ther way clearer then ther whar this gentleman an' his friend gits it."

Without much hesitation, and in a great many fewer words than one would have thought possible, Andy gave an account of the late doings at the Bar, even bringing all down to the present time, when Mrs. Ormsby had just been discovered to be missing.

Then Sam wheeled half-way around and looked Mr. Cathcart keenly in the eyes.

"You seem to be a 'spectable sort ov feller; I'd jest like to hear how you know this woman's name is Missus Caton Ormsby. That's mebbe ther hub ov ther hull perceedings."

"Professionally I seldom take much interest in a case until I have satisfied myself of the truth of my would-be client's story. Beyond that I have the advantage of having known the lady from—well, for more years, perhaps, than she would care to own to. I felt certain of my ground before I ever took a step in this direction; and though there have been some developments that I own are somewhat puzzling, I have faith in Mrs. Ormsby and her cause; and I am a man that is not often deceived. Let that side of the question rest, and let us consider what is to be done. Do you think she has been murdered?"

"Of all cool ones you ought to take the cake; but I like your style. Maybe it's a good thing all 'round that this has happened. No, I don't think she's been murdered, but I do think she's skipped ther ranch. It'll take time ter tell whether it's fur good; an' I'd give somethin' nice ef I could tell whether she hed a finger on Bess. They say ther Creeper throw'd up on Bess's trail last night; I'll bring him hyar, an' see what he can do by daylight. It'd be a high ole note ef this trail could run inter that, eh?"

"Your efforts can do no harm, and they may do some good. Use your own judgment. If you succeed, you can rest assured that you will be suitably rewarded."

"An' meantime, ef I kin advise, I wouldn't say a word 'bout what hez happened. Ef she hez bin took away, an' yer want ter hev ther p'int settled, ther less racket thar are 'bout it ther better chance them ez are in ther job'll hev ter post yer up. You'd better kim in ter grub an' git braced up fur work. An', Sam, you'd better kim along. Thar'll be lots ov ther boys 'round when they know you've got back, an' you won't jest hev so much time at yer leisure."

"Right you be. We'll lay in fur ther campaign, Mr. Cathcart. Afore we're through we may git whar grub ain't so plenty—an' it don't take long fur a man ter lose heart when his stomach's empty. Show up them pervisions ef yer want ter see 'em slaughtered. I kin eat fur three myself."

And so the two men followed Byles to the dining-room, and without further consideration of the mysterious case, set them solidly to work on the viands set before them, to which both did ample justice.

They had just fairly finished their meal when Andy came bustling into the room.

"Ye'r done jest in time. I knowed how it would be. Ilyar's ther major, chock full ov news; ef ye are ready ter hear it, say ther word, an' I'll bring him in. It's Mr. Cathcart he's askin' fur; but I don't s'pose he'll kick ag'in' openin' his budget, even if thar be another pair ov ears around."

"Not ef ther other pair are mine," said Sam, confidently; and while he spoke, the major himself appeared.

"Mrs. Ormsby is not here?" was his abrupt salutation. "I thought as much, and could not rest until I came over to see. Last night I had a very remarkable experience; and thinking it over this morning, I do not know what to make of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTERY AT THE MAJOR'S.

"I NEVER was more wide awake," continued the major; "and yet, somehow, in thinking it over, it appears to me that it must have been a dream."

"I went home rather disgusted with the

result of the evening, and threw myself down to try to sleep.

"It was not a bit of use. I could not even hold my eyes shut, though I could not say that I was thinking about anything in particular, or that time hung heavy on my hands. I can't even guess what time it was, though somewhere long after midnight."

"All of a sudden I fancied I heard footsteps without, and I got up and looked out the window."

"As sure as you live, I saw Mrs. Ormsby standing there, looking anxiously up. She seemed to be waiting for some one or something, and somehow I began to feel nervous the very moment I clapped eyes on her. I don't generally borrow trouble, and I was as much frightened at feeling that way as at anything else, though I didn't have the ghost of an idea of what was going to happen."

"What did happen seemed to be as much of a surprise to her as to me. While she was waiting there, a man appeared right at her back. Where he came from is more than I can say, but at any rate he was there, and before she had time to cry out, or even make a struggle, he had twisted something that looked like a scarf around her head and flung her over his shoulder."

"I hadn't expected any occasion to use them and so my shooting irons were just where I had laid them, at the head of my bed, and I wasn't dressed for a moonlight ramble. I made a dive for my pants, grabbed up my revolver, and in half a minute was out-doors."

"I would have done better to have been a little slower. When I got out there was nothing to be seen of either of them, and what was stranger yet I couldn't find the sign of a footprint. I went back into the house and went to sleep without rocking, and this morning was inclined to think it all a dream, only, when I had walked a few rods away I came across this. It belongs to the lady we met here last night, and after finding it I could no longer doubt. What did it all mean, and what is to be done about it?"

The article that the major had found, and which he held out toward Mr. Cathcart as he spoke, was a small, ruby breastpin, of no great value, and one that would not be apt to attract attention, yet both Cathcart and Andy Byles recognized it at once.

If the start that Singular Sam gave meant anything it was not altogether unfamiliar to him. He held out his hand, and the major dropped the pin into it without hesitation.

"It's a curious kinder yarn thet yer bin tellin', but them's ther kind ez yer find ther truest. Mebbe you know suthin' 'bout ther lady?"

"Never saw her in my life before last evening. I can imagine no reason for her being interested in me so much as to come prowling around that time of night on my account. Take it altogether it is about as mysterious a thing as ever happened to me. The next thing is, what is to be done about it?"

"Keep cool and wait. The less you show your hand in this the better. I begin to think that the thing is going to be to our advantage. They dare not harm the woman, and if they don't they will wish they had let her alone before they get through with her. If you have an eye for character you must have seen at a glance that she is no ordinary person."

"So war Bess; but they've gobbled her—an' me 'spons'ble fur her keepin'. It war a bad night fur people thet wa'n't ord'nary; wonder how it turned out fur common folks?"

Sam threw in his remarks with a shrewd smile and an inquisitive look, but the others did not seem to take any special meaning from his manner, and made no answer.

"All right, though," he continued, after a slight pause. "You fellers lay low a leetle till yer hear what I hev ter say. When I put my nose ter one end ov a trail it ain't gin'rally very long till I turn up at the other; an' when ther time kims I'll take yer, all both along. It may be all right, fur weemin are durned curious things; but it does 'pear ter me thet I smell blood in ther future. Ef it hez ter be so I kin put on high top-boots an' wade right through it."

"See here, Sam, I'm afraid you're fooling

yourself in this business," the major interrupted. "You are a very good man; but don't you try to carry too much. All I've got to do is to pass the word, and all my boys will turn out."

"Then, I wouldn't pass it—not fur ther present. It might—I don't say it would—but it might only put a bad spoke in Bess's biggest wheel. I'll tell you what I will do, though, I'll see ther Creeper. Mebbe by daylight he kin see furdur than in the dark, an' ef he makes a p'int I'll let you know. Ef not—hold on."

So far as Singular Sam went Mr. Cathcart did hold on, for he saw him no more that day. As he went out, accompanied by the major, Andy remarked:

"Sam's a sing'ler sort er feller. Now yer see him, an' now yer don't see him. Ef I war you, an' hed any other biz, I'd go on attendin' to it, an' never mind him. He'll come 'round when he's finished up ther work. More ner that I can't say. But I would remark ez that bummer they call Ragged Rufe hez bin gyatin' 'round hyar lately, an' acts ez though he wanted ter see yer. Shell I show him in?"

Mr. Cathcart had considerable unsatisfied curiosity about that very individual, and received the proposition with enthusiasm. In about five minutes the rough-looking vagabond came stumbling in.

"Glad ter see yer this A. M. Hed a heap ter say ter ther bloomin' widdur; but I understand she's skipped. Ef that be so you'll do ez well. Know no end ov things—an' I'm in the market. Ef yer want me now's ther time. I'm ez blunt ez I'm squar'. Ef yer don't mean sportin', say so an' I'll go on ter whar a man what kin peddle meet wid a fair show."

"And what have you got to peddle?"

"I'm wu'th a heap, boss. I know lots 'bout ther ins an' outs ov this hyar Caton Ormsby biz. Ther only question with me is ef you've got soap ernuf ter buy me. I tell yer, it'll take a heap ov stuff ter do it."

"That is indefinite. You may know a heap of stuff, as you say, but it may not be of any use to me. If it is, I can assure you that I have the means and disposition to pay you all it is worth. If Mrs. Ormsby had not in a sort of way vouched for you I would be inclined to think that you are working on the other side."

"Which side be those? Thar's three sides to this hyar racket, ef not more. Mine, yours, an' the other feller's."

"Then there is another fellow in it, is there?"

"You bet there is; bigger ner a wolf, an' ther fu'st letter ov his name are Caton Ormsby. Oh, I ain't no fraud, an' ter prove it I'll let yer in behind ther scenes, mebbe a lee'le furdur than ther lady war willin' yer should go. I know her ov old, an' a mighty sly piece ov calico be she to deal with. Mebbe, though, you've hearn ther hull story?"

"After a way, sir, after a way, but I have no objection to hearing it again. If you tell it any differently I shall be happy to reward you in proportion to the proven truth of what you say. There is a retainer to begin with. After you have closed your case we can decide better on the size of your fee. That it may be a large one you ought to be able to guess."

The "retainer" was a twenty-dollar gold piece which Cathcart dropped into the hastily outstretched hand.

"Thanks; ye'r a gentleman, an' white. Now see ef yer don't find me after ther same stripe."

"Fu'st an' foremost you probably are fly to ther circumstances ov ther lady's marriage, an' ther fact thet briefly tharafter ther war two people ez both found out they'd made ther biggest kinder ov mistake. Eh?"

Cathcart bowed silently.

"Wal, Linda hedn't a thrippenny bit to her name, an' Ormsby, he wa'n't much better off. Ez a consequence afore they'd tried double harness fur six months they agreed ter disagree, an' Caton waltzed off on his ear, leavin' a wife behind him, an' ef he'd come back in 'bout three er four months more he'd 'a' found a family ov two ter meet him."

"He didn't come back, though, an' he ain't come back ter this day, an' thar's whar ther trouble comes in at. Linda she got along all right after a fashion, an' purty nigh

furgot him, when along waltzed a letter from his high-toned relatives over the water inquirin' whar he war ter be found, an' suggestin' that thar war 'bout a millyun in ther findin' ov him, er ther perducin' ov his highest heir.

"She's got ther heir all right, but ther trouble are thet mebbe he'll turn up hisself; an' ef he don't, it ain't jest so easy to prove thet he won't, an' so she's come out hyar ter find out all about it. Thet's ther story ez fur ez you know it, ain't it?"

"Very true as far as it goes, but if you have nothing more to say, I can't say that you have been of much benefit, since I knew all that long ago."

"But thar's one thing yer don't seem ter know, an' I ain't sure I orter tell yer. It would bu'st yer all up, I'm afeard; an' what war left on yer might think it wouldn't be ther kerrect thing ter remember ole Rufe what did it."

"If you know anything more, sir, out with it. I never go back on my word."

"Sure ov that, be yer?"

"As sure as of anything."

"That's not sayin' much, fur in this world yer can't most always sometimes tell; but if yer say so ag'in, I'll let her went. It's ther las' time of axin'. D'yer want ther truth?"

"The whole truth," responded Mr. Cathcart, somehow more impressed than he wanted to be by the words of the vagabond.

"Then, hyar she be. This hyar Caton Ormsby b'longs to ther Saratogy fambly ov Ormsbys; but Linda she's after 'ther wrong man. I'm ole-time rocks, I be, an' when I say a thing, she are sol. Ye're a-wastin' good money on a blind lead. Pull out an' try a new trail."

"Man alive! this cannot be true!" exclaimed Cathcart, with every symptom of genuine surprise, while the very earnestness of his tones showed how hard he had been hit.

"Thet's fur you ter b'lieve ef yer wants to; ef yer thinks not, go ahead. When yer find it kin an' are, jest recommember I tole yer so. I don't jest guess yer keers ter hear any more."

"Nothing more but the proof of what you have said. That I want, and if you can give it, I must have it."

"Lemme see. Ther's no use ter be in a hurry. I've got a starter hyar, an' ther rest kin keep. I don't want too much to once—an' I ain't ov ther trustin' kind. I've gi'n yer a start, an' you've gi'n me a start. When I git dead broke, I'll hit yer ag'in; an' ther next time it'll be more solid fax."

"One question, though. Last night Mrs. Ormsby accused the man known here as Gentle Joe of being Caton Ormsby, and her husband. Is that the truth?"

"You bet it's true, fur I heard her a-doin' ov it; but whether he's Caton Ormsby, er ef so ther right one, an' ef he are, ef he be her husband—waal, thet's ther hub ov ther hull mystery, an' fer ther present I ain't givin' it away. Day-day, I don't b'lieve I'll tarry."

The man of rags waited for no more questions, and before Cathcart could make a motion to hinder he had slipped out of the door and out of the hotel. For the day he was seen no more in the neighborhood of the Golden Lamb.

CHAPTER XV.

A FOUL SHOT.

THE greater part of Blazer's threw up their hands very early in the game, and went back to town. Bess Stanley was popular because she was handsome and full of nerve, though as she kept the whole camp at a distance there was very little real knowledge about her.

It was, accordingly, not to be expected that their enthusiasm would carry the men from the Bar further than the law allowed—or even quite so far. After all, it was Singular Sam's circus, and he wasn't about. As like as not she had gone away of her own accord, and all this public demonstration was so much nonsense. The girl might have been frightened over the adjournment of the lynch court, or she might be leading away the man they had intended should be their victim.

When these ideas began to be broached the pursuit slackened, ceased, and the people went quietly back. Of all the gang that

went out at full cry, there were just two that held on, and they were so far in the advance that they did not know of the defection.

If they had known they would not have cared. They generally traveled together; and asked for no other backing. Jess Hurley and the Baby were a full team, and all go.

They had not followed any trail, since that would have been impossible; but at the same time they had not run altogether at random. About an hour later they were crouching among the mountain shadows, listening to the noise of approaching footsteps.

"It's some ov ther fellers frum ther Bar," muttered the Baby. "What's ther use skip-pin' outer sight?"

"Don't fool yerself," answered Hurley, in a cautious whisper. "Ther fellers frum ther Bar ain't this kind; they went back half an hour ago. We've jest hit ther place ter git ther full wu'th ov our money an' ther right change back. Lay low now, an' don't yer use yer irons till I give ther word ter sail in. It's pints we're after; not blood an' hair. It's some one scoutin' 'round, an' it's a fair bet he's got ther girl hid away safe ernuf. Ef anything happens ter him, she mou't starve long ernuf afore we could find her. Don't shoot."

"What yer givin' me? I ain't one ov ther shootin' kind; but ef I git my dukes on him, I'll jest mash him. Ruu it ter suit yerself; but when yer want backin', say ther word, an' I'll be thar ez usual."

The warning, however, had the effect of making the Baby shrink back further in the darkness, and Hurley hugged the ground so closely that even his companion could not see him; though there was an open patch of moonlight just beyond.

While they looked a man stepped into this vista, and first glancing sharply around, uttered a low whistle, which was answered a moment later by a similar signal, and then a second man cautiously approached. Up to the instant of making himself known by the whistle, the Baby was unaware of his presence in the neighborhood, and he gave an involuntary start as he thought how narrowly they had escaped stumbling upon him in the dark.

"All correct here?" asked the first comer.

"You bet—up to ther present time. We'll hev a hull menagerie ov turtle doves ter choose frum, ef ther thing keeps on comin' straight. Ther jobs hez bin started squar' ernuf, anyhow."

"Good enough! There will be a fair account from the other side of the house, though it might be better."

"Everything right in town, then?"

"Right as far as they went; but there was a bit of confounded carelessness that spoiled the evening. Dave isn't much better than a wooden man for sharp, hot work, and Jess Hurley and the Baby had to get mixed in. While a lot of infernal chinning was going on the cross-eyed man skipped. He's scared away, good enough; but I'd sooner have seen him carried out feet foremost. He's not one of the kind that forgets, and he might have more than one neck stretched if he opened up. I tell you he's drifted back here fer a purpose."

"Whar did he go to? Ef he slid out of camp it gives all ther better show."

"Heaven only knows. The man is like a weasel. He can crawl in anywhere. It's not the first time I've had him hunted. If they had payed less attention to Gentle Joe, and more to business it would have saved a heap of trouble. The next time I'll have a man to run things."

Never mind ther next time—that ain't hyer yit. What's ther bonus fur ther scalp?"

"A cool hundred extra."

"That's biz; I'll promulgate. An' how 'bout Joe? What war ther ground he war takin'? I've bin a-thinkin' he warn't foolin' 'round Blazer's fur nothin'—an' he ain't makin' salt out ov ther keards."

"Don't fret yourself about him; I'm watching him. If he's only thinking about the pasteboards, he's a man we'd better not meddle with, but leave that to the Bar. It does look as though he and the woman might be setting up a game in partnership. He is just gritty enough to run the awful big risks for a shy at a fortune. If that's their game they would be setting it up mightily neat—if it wasn't fer one thing."

"Durned ef I don't b'lieve yer 'fraid ov him."

"Don't you worry about me; I'll look after my interests when the time comes, and won't give an inch, either. Just so the boys don't fail with the women— Ah!"

Then there was the sharp explosion of a pistol.

Jess Hurley had been listening and looking. The voices did not sound altogether unfamiliar, yet he could not place them, and as from time to time they fell almost to a whisper, he did not altogether catch the drift of what they were saying. From where he was lying he could not obtain a view of the face of either of the speakers.

He shifted his position slowly and carefully, and had his reward. Beyond a doubt he placed the owner of the rough voice, and he had his suspicions of the other. A little further and he could make a strange discovery and name them both.

Slowly and without the least noise he raised upon his elbow.

Then the man upon whom he was spying wheeled, threw up his hand and fired.

Jess scarce knew what hurt him. With a dull, half-uttered groan he sunk to the ground, and the man came boldly forward, and bending over, looked down into his face with some curiosity but no pity.

CHAPTER XVI.

ROYAL GEORGE TIGHTENS HIS GRIPE.

THERE was a certain other Mrs. Ormsby, mentioned in the earlier chapters, whose fate may still be a matter of interest to the reader.

The stage had hardly swept out of sight when there was a transformation scene. The little lady was on her feet, and a smile on her face, though there was an element of perplexity in it that showed that her pleasure was not altogether unalloyed.

"So much for him. If he has a chance to see further into the millstone until we have a hole drilled clear through I want to know. At the same time you came a shade too late. There is some one else taking a hand in the game, and I'm very much afraid that he has a point or two more to the good than we have. Who is Buck Burke?"

Royal George did not seem in as happy a humor. He looked at Mrs. Ormsby in a coldly critical sort of way, in which there was more of suspicion than anything else.

"Oh, you needn't growl over it. Things are as they must be, of course, and if we are fated to fail, why, it's only so much the worse for us, that's all. But do you know who Buck Burke is? His face somehow looked familiar, though I couldn't place him, and I don't suppose I would have tried if he hadn't taken a hand in our affairs. If he knows us we must really know him."

"And that truck war kerrect thet you war a-tellin' us, of his hevin' waltzed off with yer paper?"

"Partly. There wasn't anything in them that the world at large mustn't know very soon, and if an inkling gets out sooner where's the difference? It may be all the better."

"Glad yer think so. Only, if this Buck Burke should happen to be one ov yer old side pards, an' yer tried ter throw me, it might make a mighty onpleasant mix fur all both ov us. I'm willin' ter give yer all ther help I kin but I don't intend ter be a cat's-paw either. Jest recommember thar may be trouble yit in ther household."

Mrs. Ormsby laughed, a clear, ringing little laugh, as though she found something very amusing in the tone of the man.

"You dear, delightful old bear, don't worry about me. Just provide for your own safety, and I'll engage that no harm will come to you from me or mine, and that I will live square down to what I have promised you. Now, the question is, how have things been running, and what is the latest from that sick hole of iniquity, Blazer's Bar? Are they looking for me there, or will I have to introduce myself and open the subject up from top to bottom?"

"Blazer's Bar ain't the worst place in the world, as you may find afore you go through with it. There's mines thar overhanging kinds, an' we're goin' ter work 'em fur a while they're wu'th. But I don't think they're lookin' fur you very bad jest about this time. Fact are that if ther stage are on schedule

time, you've jest about arrove. You've bin on ther road in two sections, an' ther percession hez got in ahead ov ther hearse, if thar ain't been no drawbacks."

There was a malicious twinkle in the man's eyes as he spoke, and he evidently enjoyed the start that his companion gave.

"Not *that* woman again?" exclaimed Mrs. Ormsby.

"That blessed, identickle female, ez large ez life an' twice ez ugly. It wa'n't a bad idear, yer stoppin' off hyar. Ef yer hed gone on, yer might 'a' struck her onprepared, an' there's no telling what would 'a' follered. She'd ez soon shoot ez eat, an' she's got a bad man ter back her. Ef that scallywag husband ov yours *are* thar, he'll think the world hez kin to an end about ther time she meets him. Ye'r' certain ther first letter ov his name ain't Buck Burke, be ye?"

"Ah! then you do *not* know who our companion of the stage really was? I'm glad of that. If you don't, neither do I, and that settles it. He seemed to take such an interest in our affairs that for a time I was really afraid he might be some one I ought to have recognized. He's not a stranger in this region, anyhow."

"I've got a couple men on his trail now, an' if they find him, ez I more ner half think they will, it won't make much difference who he is. Now, what's yer game about Mortimer?"

"Allow him to show his hand without making an open call of it. If we can trust him, he will be a valuable piece of furniture. If we can't—perhaps he ought not to reach Blazer's for the present."

"Good enough. And I suppose you want to git there ez soon ez possible. Ef so, I kin take you right along over, an' we won't be obliged ter pass through Jumptown at all. But fu'st, you must rest up a bit. I don't think they will come out ter look fur you from the town much afore morning. Then they kin whistle. Ther toll-gate will be down, an' we'll be 'way ther other side ov ther divide."

"I'm ready for anything as soon as I get my supper. You can help me out on that, of course?"

"To be sure. I can set yer down to a lay-out ez will make yer mouth water. A leetle sleep then, an' we'll try an' git 'round to ther other side ov ther mount'in."

Amicable relations were by this time fully restored. Their conversation had not been overheard, since the following of the man had reversed the usual order of things, and gone on ahead, leaving the two alone together, to have their talk out.

It was not a very long journey to where the outlaws were encamped and once there Mrs. Ormsby made herself very much at home for a captive. She eat a hearty supper, had some further conversation with the captain, refused to notice the admiring glances of the half-dozen men that were assistant toll-collectors, and then peacefully lay down to her slumbers in the little wicky-up that had been assigned specially to her use. Evidently her surroundings did not trouble her since she fell at once into a gentle slumber—and immediately thereafter Royal George stole quietly out of camp. When he had led his horse a short distance he flung himself into the saddle and galloped away at a great rate.

If he intended to keep his departure a secret he was pretty badly fooled.

Hardly had the noise of the footsteps died away when there was a low whistle from the rocks above the niche in which the cabin nestled, and almost at the same time the little lady herself made her appearance.

She looked carefully around, to see that the coast was clear and then upward to get a glimpse of her visitor.

"It's all right, little one, he's made his calling and electi—sure, and is half-way on the way to Jump—own by this time. I judge you didn't drii—very hearty of his coffee or you won't have wakened quite so easy. Come—w. I'm waiting for you. There's some—ness to look after that won't keep."

"I—n't think I'm overburdened with—anybody, and even Royal George is—pen to watching. Without your warning I would have had an eye open; with it of course I was wide awake all the time. Here I am, what's on the carpet?"

"You will find out when we get there.

Meantime the sooner we get clear out of the reach of Royal George's fingers the safer I will feel. No doubt when he is in an amiable mood he is a very clever fellow; but if he suspected we were playing him false he would be around hot for murder. I wonder you ever had anything to do with him."

"I had my doubts; but the fact is, I needed him when it wouldn't do to let either your hand or mine appear. He hunted me up, seemed to know a good deal, and offered me terms, that's all. To-night he will hit or miss and after this it will make no great difference which. Once at the Bar and he may make the best or the worst of it. After detecting him in his treachery what can he say, anyhow?"

"He'll be apt to try to do a good deal more than he will say. All the same, that's no matter. We are ready to take the chances. With a million on the turn and a square box you would be a fool if you didn't risk your last dollar. I have things in trim; are you ready to go?"

"Don't be foolish. Of course I am; but how? Are we to walk?"

"A mile, perhaps. Then you will have as good a beast under you as you ever mounted, and I hope by to-morrow you will see your way clear to getting both hands into the Ormsby coffers."

"Where they belong. Lead on, I am with you."

Then the two silently stole away from the camp, turning their faces in the direction of Blazer's.

As had been suggested, there was a shorter path to the Bar that did not go through Jumptown at all.

The young man seemed well acquainted with it, and once in the saddle he led the way at what was next thing to a break-neck pace.

There was very little conversation, and going at a hard gallop wherever the narrow trail would allow, the time seemed to slip rapidly away. It was not many miles yet to the Bar when they heard a sudden hail from a point they had just passed.

"Halt, thar, an' hands up!" was the stern order, in a voice there was no trouble in recognizing as Royal George's.

The two were at a gallop already; at the cry they put their horses to a run, looking nervously back in the direction whence the sound had come.

Then—they all fell in a heap.

A rope had been stretched across the trail, and over it they crashed, falling heavily to the ground.

"Guess not," chuckled a coarse voice. "When Royal George are left it'll be some other day, not this day. Ther poor infants war goin' ter throw ther uncle Ezry. Reck-on thar will hev ter be a leetle palaver afore this firm dissolves. Ef not, why not?"

He came forward from his hiding place as he spoke, and stood looking down at the senseless, prostrate two, while over his shoulder three or four faces showed dark, their owners awaiting the orders that Royal George was ready to give them.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROYAL GEORGE LAYS DOWN THE LAW.

"No use trustin' ov a woman, even ef she's yer own flesh an' blood," said the outlaw, perfectly unconcerned over the fact that the two neither spoke nor moved, and might well have met their death by the fall.

"Ef I hedn't seen the youngster a-scoutin' 'round they might 'a' took me in, but Royal George hes ter keep both eyes open, an' it's a cold day when he gets left. Let's see ef it's any face ez I know. 'Pears there's a hefty sight of strangers on these traits, an' all wantin' a finger in ther same pie."

He dragged the young man a few paces forward, to where the moonbeams would fall better on his face.

The body lay limp and heavy in his hands, but there were still signs of life about it, and even as he looked a long-drawn sigh betokened returning consciousness.

"Hyar, you, Ned, give a squint at him. I swar he beats me. Hev yer ever seen him afore?"

Ned the Nailer slouched forward. He was a slow, ponderous sort of a man, but he had his value. No man had roamed more widely or seen more faces, and every one that he saw he seemed to remember forever. He

coldly turned the body over and looked at it, first from one side and then from the other, in a meditative sort of way, stepped back a pace or two and thoughtfully expectorating before he answered:

"It's a blamed tenderfoot, I'll answer fur that; but if he ain't forked-lightnin' I want ter know. Yas, I've seen him afore, but it war ther other side ov ther Rockies, 'way back East. He's a sharp frum New York, captain, an' ther fu'st letter of his name *thar* war Hen Hurley. He's on the make, every time; an' he don't care how he makes it. Say ther word, an' I'll slit his weasand, an' send him ter never-kin-back ag'in. It's ther best thing yer ken do."

The Nailer scowled as he spoke, and Royal George looked at him sharply. There was something in the man's tone indicating an earnestness born of a personal reason.

"Don't hurry ther funeral. Mebbe he'll make a dyin' speech afore we turn him off ter take the road ahead ov us. Lucky ez yer know him—who don't yer know, though? Tell us who he are afore he kims 'round. I'll talk ter him then, with ther bark all on."

"He's a keard sharp, fur ther fu'st, an' he's on ther shoot every time. When yer crowd him close he don't give an inch, an' ef yer must know it, he took ther daisiest pard I ever hed out ov ther damp, an' him then jest a boy. He war bad then. I'll bet high he's perfect blazes now. He's bad medicine fur yer, captain, better let me send him over ther range."

"Hold hard! That's my say so. When ther time comes mebbe I'll gi'n ther word; but mebbe I'll need him now. Jest hold him so he can't do no harm, while I look after ther woman."

Mrs. Ormsby seemed to be the least hurt of the two. Though perfectly dazed by the fall she had never lost complete consciousness, and by this time was sitting up, staring around her in a wondering sort of way, as if trying, but unable, to understand what had happened.

She looked first at Royal George and then at the body of the young man. There was trouble in her face, but no very deep grief, as the outlaw leader could see as he narrowly watched her.

"Sea'ssly, my dear," he growled as he saw that she had sufficiently recovered to take in his words. "Yer didn't s'pose I war dog-goned fool ernuf ter trust yer alone in camp, an' not keep an eye on whar yer war goin'? Ther man er woman ez gets away frum Royal George gits up mighty early in the mornin'. Mebbe you'd be willin' now ter sell out at half price, bein' ez yer goods hez got badly damaged. What's all this racket about?"

"When we see what has been the result of your interference, will be time enough to give you an answer," was the bold response of the little lady. "Perhaps it may be all the better. The hands are all on the board now, and we will know how to play them."

"Ez yer choose. You've bin tryin' ter run things your way, now I'll take hold an' run 'em mine. Ef yer don't feel like helpin', thar's more than one Mrs. Ormsby in ther bushes, an' you an' yer friend kin lay back till ther fun's all over. Maybe, then, we kin turn yer loose; but ef we don't, I don't guess there'll be anybody inquirin' round fur ther lost lam's."

"You're welcome to try your best or your worst. When you get yourself into trouble, come around and maybe we can help you out. Now, what's the next thing on the carpet? I don't suppose you intend to keep us here all night, and as Henry is hard to hurt, I suppose he will be ready to travel in a few moments. The sooner we start the sooner we will get to where we can have a chance to doctor our bruises. I'm shaken up pretty fairly myself, and it's no thanks to you that I'm not dead. Of course I'll remember this night's work in the future."

"You always was the leetle lady fur cheek, an' yer ain't softened up any by time. All right. You kin go along, an' I'll show yer ther game ez it stands. No one could offer fairer. Ef ther rest choose ter take yer in on ther ground floor, I'm willin'. But ef they don't, you'll hev ter lay by till ther game's over."

By this time the man recognized as Henry Hurley had straightened himself up. His

senses came back to him with marvelous quickness when they once began, and if he had not taken a wary glance around him before moving, it is possible that there might have been some wild work. When he discovered that Ned the Nailer was viewing him over the barrel of a leveled pistol, and only seemed anxious that he should take the aggressive, he silently settled back into an easy position and waited for the conversation to come to a close.

"Sorry fur yer, pard; but this are what kims ov keepin' bad company. It's even up now whether ter take yer along er leave yer corpus. Ef yer kin keep up with ther hearse, you kin j'ine ther percesshun; but I gi'n yer fair warnin', when yer drops out there'll be a dead man on ther grass."

"Why are you going to take us?"

"That's none ov *your* biz; that's mine. Mebbe you'll know when yer git thar, an' mebbe you won't. All I'm askin' is, whether ye'r' ready ter start? Whar one ov yer goes ther other follers, I give yer fair warnin'; an' when one drops out, t'other'll be dead. Yes er no?"

Hurley looked over at his late companion and saw her nod her head. If her face went for anything, it meant that she believed Royal George was in sober earnest in what he said.

Hurley answered briefly:

"Fix it to suit yourself, then. I want to bring no further trouble on yonder lady, since I am to blame for what she has already suffered. Lead on, and you'll find me with you until she says 'stop!'"

"An' you'll promise ter keep ther peace an' stay with us till yer see ther lay-out?"

Hurley nodded, and the outlaw extended his hand.

"It's a barg'in, fur that long an' no longer. I may hev ter cut yer throat; I may take yer in on ther ground floor. Thar's no knowin' till I see ther rest an' know what yer kin be wuth. Git good an' ready afore yer say ther word; then, ef yer can't keep up, *look out*."

On this one-sided sort of bargain the hands of the two men met in a firm clasp, and then Royal George gave the order to move on.

No one else said a word.

There was evidently no mean discipline among the bandits; and yet, if Hurley could have seen the dark glance turned upon him by Ned the Nailer, he might have had some doubts about his ultimate safety.

"An' I s'pose we'll have no trouble with you?" added George, looking keenly at the lady.

"Scarcely, in the shape you have things now. If you think there is no hereafter, drive on."

"Don't threaten; it only brings yer bad luck. An' keep cool. We hev biz on hand, an' it's yer own fault ef it takes this shape. But mebbe it'll be ther better, all 'round. Now, keep yer jaws shut an' yer eyes open; we may hev some resks ter run. When I want yer ter talk, I'll say so; an' I wouldn't advise yer ter open yer mouth afore that."

The little party started off. The captives had been remounted, and all rode in utter silence.

When Hurley noted that there was no sound of hoofs, and looked carefully down he discovered that the horse's feet were muffled.

"I wonder where the infernal ruffian is going to take us," he thought to himself. "Seems as though he may be going to run us into some sort of danger, and he'll have it fixed so if there is any scrapping done I can't bite back; curses on it, he has my hand to the most one-sided bargain ever. Hen Hurley was caught in. Let him drive on with his band-wagon, but if he thinks there is no hereafter it will be fun to see him grin when he gets left."

Where they passed the line of danger, if such there was, did not appear since there was no suspicious sound, until finally they halted in a shadow so dense that the nearest objects were covered by the veil of darkness.

For fully a minute they remained waiting and listening. Then there was a low, peculiar whistle, and almost immediately thereafter a subdued voice sounded, just in their front.

"Ali right, Cap. Yer hyar at last. We bin waitin' on yer an' feared suthin' hed happened. Git in, an' stir up ther fire.

Thar might be worse places in ther world ter live till mornin' in."

"True enough, if the man's dead," thought Hurley, as once more on the move he followed the procession into what he knew must be a cave.

Then a light flamed out into the darkness, and revealed a singular scene.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

THE first thought that darted across Bess Stanley's mind when so suddenly assaulted was that she was in no great danger. If bodily harm had been intended—and she believed there were reasons why, in a general way, she might apprehend that—there would have been no nonsense. A knife or pistol would have done the work thoroughly and quickly, without half of the risk there was in this bold abduction. A single scream and half the Bar would be at her back in a minute.

But she had no chance to scream.

From the very first she was utterly helpless, and if she was not strangled, in the outset it was more luck than judgment. Her mouth was all the time kept stopped, and about half the time her wind pipe. As a result, in a very few moments she was near to insensibility.

That was only temporary; but when full possession of her faculties drifted back she discovered that she had been effectually gagged, and transported well out of camp.

Some involuntary movement called the attention of her captor to the fact that she was again observant of her surroundings; and he did not seem displeased.

"Now, see hyar, my duck," he grumbled, "it ain't the squar' thing ter be makin' me tote a hundred an' twenty pound ov gal meat an' shemale cussedness. Ther ain't fur ter go, an' I can't see why yer mightn't ez well walk ez ride, an' save us ther carryin' ov yer. Ef I sot yer down will yer hoof it jest ez I say so? Nod yer head ef it's a go."

Still retaining a gripe upon her wrists the man who had held her in his arms placed her upon the ground and gazed keenly into her face.

Resistance was worse than useless; and to have an opportunity for strategy or flight it was necessary that the man should be thrown off his guard. Bess nodded vigorously.

"Sense ter ther backbone, an' Tom an' me 'll hev it a leetle better than we figgered on. Hyar, Tom. No user ter be foolin' way time. I've got this daisy's promise not ter make trouble. Jest come forth an' we'll propell."

Without evincing a desire for resistance Bess Stanley held back. The action was a question as plain as she could make it, and meant:

"What is the meaning of this; where do you take me?"

"Ax me no questions, leetle one, an' I'll tell yer no lies—tho' I s'pect we mout ez well give yer ther squar' tip, an' be done with it. Ye'r makin' a heap ov trouble right down thar in Blazer's; an' fur fear thet ther eperdemic may spread to ther mount'in it's my pinyun thet ther boss hez decided ter git yer outen ther way. Fact are, I wouldn't bet three cents on ther condish' ov yer throat to-morrer mornin'."

The man gave a low, rude laugh, and looked sharply at his prisoner.

If he thought to shake her nerve he was very much mistaken. The savage threat braced her up in a moment. She drew herself up proudly, and gave a bend of the head which said that she was ready.

Gripping her shoulder with a clasp so strong as to be painful the man stepped away, following closely in the wake of the comrade he had addressed as Tom.

The way was rough and in darkness. By the time they had made half a dozen turns Bess might have guessed her direction from the camp but she certainly could not have pointed toward it, and she began to hope that the toilsome journey would soon come to an end. The effect and the suspense were proving a severer test of body and mind than she had counted on.

It was no great relief when they came upon a third man holding their horses. That showed that the journey was to be one of some extent.

Without a word her special guard threw her up on the back of one of the steeds, and then swung himself up behind her. There was no consultation, but all moved off together; and from the silence in which it was done the girl imagined that the horse's hoofs were muffled, and that the men looked for some danger.

The latter thought gave her a thrill of hope. It was possible that some signs of pursuit that had escaped her notice had been perceived by them. They might not be as far as it seemed from the Bar, and any minute, might see the people from Blazer's striking in to her rescue. Just now they did not seem half as bad a set as when she was defying them all in defense of a vagabond for whom she had more hate than sympathy, but who had enlisted her on his side on the strength of a few mysterious words.

Prepared for something she was not ready for what did happen.

As the horses crept slowly down a narrow and precipitous trail the way before them was suddenly illuminated.

The horses snorted and stopped instantly, while a solid curse fell from the lips of the man whose arm was around Bess Stanley's waist. His other hand dropped from the reins and darted to a revolver.

"No use, boyees," laughed a coarse voice, sounding from some point above them.

"Yer didn't s'pose yer could begin ter play a game sich ez this without Royal George takin' a hand? Paws up, you dung-hill roosters, or ketch ther gufts."

The response was three shots, aimed in the direction of the voice, and then the three dug spurs into their horses' sides, and started recklessly downward.

In answer came a quick shot that pierced the brain of the leading animal. It fell dead in the path, so suddenly dropped by the stunning wound that it only gave a few convulsive kicks.

If the intention was to wall in the other two it failed. The man who held Bess had regained the reins, and with a quick motion lifted his horse to the leap.

The animal went over like a bird, but in the leap Bess had the chance that she was looking for. She could hardly make her case worse; and with a sudden spring she launched herself out of the arms of her captor, and dropped lightly to the side of the trail as the third man swept by to the leap.

Without hesitating she rushed up the rocky roadway down which she had just come, vainly striving to utter a cry for help to those she believed had come to her assistance.

Several shots sounded from the rocks, and from below came the sharp cry of a man badly hit, and the muffled sound of hoofs. It was pretty certain that Bess Stanley need anticipate no further present trouble from her late abductors, and she slackened her pace as she came to a crest in the trail, and saw a couple of dark figures standing in front of her.

As she halted the figures moved forward. "Pon me soul, it's a woman! Ther woods are jest goin' ter be full ov 'em ter-night. Say, leetle girls, w'ot brought you hyar?"

While he spoke the man was cutting away the cords that held the gag in her mouth and loosened those that bound her hands. In appearance she was once more free, and if she had still the weapons her former captors had taken from her she would not have cared whether these men were friend or foe. As it was, she answered cordially:

"If you had light enough for straight shooting you had enough to see, and if you could see you know almost as much about it as I do. The ruffians carried me off from Blazer's Bar. They had their own reasons, no doubt, but they didn't make me their confidant. Since I have so happily escaped it may have been for the best, henceforth I will be on my guard. You have my thanks for your gallant rescue; now, if you can guide me back to Blazer's Bar I will be able to reward you in a fitting manner. It was worth money, and money you shall have."

"That's squar' talk, an' ther way we generally like ter hear it, but ter-night that filly won't trot. Fact are, we won't feel safe at ther Bar, an' ef we did we've got bigger biz this side of it. Sorry ef it puts yer out at all, but ez we couldn't think of leavin' a on-protected female alone in ther woods I guess.

you'll hev ter kin along with us. Ef yer common grateful fur what we've did you won't make no nonsense, an' ef yer do, ez we're pressed fur time we'll hev ter drop yer on ther spot an' add yer corpse ter profit an' loss. How is that fur a squar' deal, without a flyer?"

"You are frank enough, and I suppose I must submit, though why you should burden yourself when an hour or so of time and a little riding over a road that no doubt you know well enough would fill your pockets with gold, is more than I can understand."

"Tain't at all necessary thet you sh'ud. You kin jest s'pose thet yer out fur air an' exercise, an' resign yer own purty self to ther men ez will take ther best ov keer ov yer—fur ther present. I want ter treat yer white, but ef there's ter be eny monkey-shines I'll hev ter put ther strings back jest ez we found 'em. Reckon you're Bess Stanley, an' she's ther identical bit ov caliker we're lookin' fer."

"I am not ashamed of my name, and that is more than any of you ruffians can say," answered the girl, in sudden heat. "If I had known when I was well off I would have stuck to the other gang. They were the first finders, and for all I see they would have been the safest keepers. I came to you thinking you were men. If I was mistaken so much the worse for you when the time of retribution comes. Go on; I have nothing more to say."

"You talk like a leetle tin angel on wheels, an' I'm only sorry we ain't time ter start yer up ag'in. We'll trust yer, an' I'll sw'ar thet you'll find it safest ter try no sharp tricks. It won't be a very long ride, an' mebbe yer kin find friends at ther end ov it. Excuse me, but hyer goes."

With this indefinite programme a horse was brought forward, and again Bess was mounted behind a man she could only guess was an outlaw. He held her gingerly enough, and as her hands and tongue were free perhaps she had made something by the exchange of captors. As neither party was known to her, and their intentions were completely a mystery, the ultimate profit was as yet a question.

If some one had got hold of her secret she could guess well enough that the one party or the other, or perhaps both, meant murder.

The lights that had illuminated the scene had been extinguished; and now three or four more dark forms came gliding into view, and gathered themselves around her. She was more thoroughly hemmed in than ever.

These men, however, went forward with no hesitation or fear, and the journey proved to be neither as long nor as tiresome as she had feared. In the course of an hour they halted, and she was helped from the horse, and led forward into what seemed to be the solid rock, though a way opened itself as they advanced.

"Don't be skeered ov ther darkness leetle one, ther gas ain't been turned on yit, an' it's a shade lonely, but we'll 'luminate after a bit, an' maybe you'll hev more company than yer keer fur. We had a hint thet yer friends war on ther road, an' thort we'd hev a 'greeable s'prise all 'round."

The man departed with a mocking laugh, and Bess was left alone in darkness so thick that it could almost be felt. For a time she did not move an inch, or hear a sound, and it seemed very much as though she had been buried alive.

The men had promised her a light, but it was hardly safe to place much faith in what they said, and Bess was not of the kind to sit down until things developed in course. She preferred to find out the worst at once, and rising to her feet she began to move carefully around, feeling her way first with her feet and then with her outstretched hands.

She found the rocky wall that shut her in, and as she began to edge carefully along its base she heard a sound at last, that came from just above her head.

"Dark as a little dungeon down there, and I guess it's no use to ring for lights. Lucky I know the place like a book. I'm ahead of the time and I'd better take a seat in a corner till something turns up."

Right after this soliloquy came the sound of some one leaping lightly to the rocky floor; and immediately afterward a voice from above:

"Ha, ha! There's been a double deal, my friend, and you're on the wrong side of the house. The gate goes shut, an' you're our mutton!"

There was the noise of a falling rock, and then a light flared up, and from the belt of the man in front of her Brilliant Bess snatched a revolver and leaping back aimed it squarely at his head.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CANDIDATE FOR UTAH.

THE room into which Mrs. Ormsby looked was at least twenty feet square, and was but sparsely furnished. A lamp, that gave a brilliant light, was suspended from the ceiling, and standing just below it, with a mocking smile on his lips and his arms folded over his breast, was Joe Lipscombe.

A few feet away a woman, whose back was toward the spectators, menaced him with a cocked revolver, while her words dropped from her lips in a low, compressed tone of savage earnestness.

"Not a word—not a sound!" she hissed. "You have sealed your own doom by your own mad folly. For a time I suspected; again, I thought I had done you injustice. All along it was but the turn of a hand whether I slew you or not. After this I cannot doubt. You know me and fear me; that is proof enough of your guilt. It is not time yet for vengeance to begin; yet sooner than miss you, I will slay you now. Joe Lipscombe—gambler, thief, cut-throat, vile assassin—prepare to meet your end!"

"Which end, my dear? And, if the end is part of me, how can I meet it? Take it altogether, I am inclined to believe that you labor a little under a misapprehension, both in regard to my destiny and your mission. I may be all that you mention; but what is that to you?"

"It means that you are not fit to live. If you are what you have just admitted, why should I spare you?"

"Well, go down and shoot into any sort of a crowd at Blazer's, and you'll hit one of that kind; so why pick out me?"

"Why? Because you are dangerous to me. One of us must die, and I must live until my mission has been performed. My vengeance could wait, even against you, while it was sure, but you have showed your hand, and, having wrested from you your own weapons, I must strike. If you have a prayer that you dare say, say it now. In another moment it will be too late!"

It was a strange scene; and Mrs. Ormsby, on the threshold, viewed it with a wonderful interest, scarcely drawing a full breath lest her presence might be observed. The girl was in such deadly earnest, the man so utterly careless of her desperate intentions, that there seemed but one possible ending to it all.

"Have you nothing to say—no explanation to offer for this vile plan of abduction?"

"Nothing at all. It's going to be such a cold-blooded murder that I really think I will enjoy it. Why, Lucretia Borgia was nothing alongside of you. If I had some one to meet me I'd offer three to one that it will break you all up—after the thing has been done. But, if it's all the same, couldn't you aim a little lower? When sleeping there is generally a peaceful, child-like, innocent look on my face that it's a pity to spoil, and I know that your aesthetic taste will be shocked when your immediate excitement has cooled. However, have your own way. I don't want to quarrel. Anything to suit a lady."

With his arms still folded, he threw himself carelessly backward into a seat that was just behind him and looked up at her with a mocking insolence that would have maddened another woman.

Upon Brilliant Bess it had just the contrary effect. In a moment she was cold as ice.

"Stand up, sir, if you please. I prefer to have our talk face to face."

"Thanks, but I'm tired. You can't do more than shoot, and you're going to do that anyhow. I allow I'll have my own way, for I can't see that it makes any difference, one way or the other."

"And you will not make even a struggle for your life?"

"Nary struggle. Two very good reasons have I, my dear. I am aware that you are

as quick and sure at a snap-shot as any living human being, so that I wouldn't have the ghost of a chance; and I intend that when the angel of Blazer's Bar leaves here—if leave she ever does—she shall feel herself a first-class assassin, and nothing else."

"I believe you lie to me now, as you have lied to me before this. You have some scheme, some plot, some device by which you have me in your power. You would scarcely have been so cool and careless else. What man ever before took Gentle Joe's weapons, much less a woman?"

"I assure you, my friend, I have no plot or scheme. Since you have got down to question and answer, and are only reasonably ravenous for blood, I don't object to adding that I haven't had chance or time to concoct any. I came here quite by chance; had no knowledge or expectation that I would meet you; and I have no ends that you can interfere with one way or another. You saw me when that blazing old lamp was suddenly let down from above, and you made a quick dive at my revolver. As, unfortunately for me, the thing was empty, I didn't interfere. I've been shooting at half of Blazer's with it to-night, and it snapped half a dozen times before I thought of it, that I didn't hold the whole earth."

He spoke with such an air of mocking truth, that his words carried instant conviction. In mad fury she flung the weapon against the rocky wall of the cavern.

Instantly there was an unexpected response, for, as it struck, there was a sharp report, followed by a woman's shrill scream, just at her back, and then the light went out, darkness came back, and she heard the sound of a chuckle and a closing door.

It was almost certain that Bess Stanley had been deceived; but the knowledge did not unnerve her for more than a fractional part of a moment. Hardly had the harsh echo of the report died away when, like a tigress, she sprang in the darkness at the spot where she had seen Gentle Joe seated.

The spot was vacant, and hurt somewhat by the heavy fall that followed, she lay quivering.

"A moment, if you please," she heard a liquid, feminine voice. It was the voice of Mrs. Ormsby, saying:

"I think perhaps you have made a mistake here; and you will certainly do more harm than good if you go ramping around in the dark. Let us have a light and look at things. A little explanation is next in order."

The cool words were supplemented by the striking of a match, and by its little blaze the lady lighted a small taper, which, however, gave light enough to render the nearest objects distinguishable, and even rendered less dense the shadows in the remotest parts of the room.

"Ah! a lady of sense, and, no doubt, a prisoner like ourselves."

It was Gentle Joe that was speaking, and from a point behind where Bess Stanley had been standing. He had been quick to shift his position, and now came forward.

"You are right, sir; I certainly should not have come here of my own free will and accord. Why I was allowed to enjoy the scene that I have just been treated to is more than I can explain, but I have no doubt there was a reason for it. Perhaps if we were all to compare notes, it might not be so hard to explain. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Gentle Joseph is my—well, not patronymic—say pseudonym. After a reconsideration I decided, down in Blazer's, to back the hand that this lady was playing, and as a consequence was compelled to fight the town. The contract seemed heavier than I had bargained for, after the first flush of enthusiasm had worn off, and I evaporated. I did not do any particular damage, though I did a good bit of shooting, and being aware of a hiding-place here, I stumbled into it; finding a good deal more than I expected—prominently, Miss Stanley. Then she snatched my revolver and began to expound. The rest you know as much about as I do. I saw you when you halted at the threshold. What is in reserve for us I can only guess at."

"Then it is hardly worth while to say anything in regard to our plans for the future, but as we are in together I suppose our interests for the present lie in the same direction. When there is a chance that we can

“That's about the length and breadth of it. We're not all turned in here for nothing, though maybe I haven't much to do with the racket. There wasn't a living man that could have guessed, half an hour ago, that I would be here. If you two ladies compare notes maybe you could get a glimpse through the millstone.”

“Not so certain of that am I—but who are you?”

A sudden thought appeared to strike Mrs. Ormsby. She moved the little taper closer to the face of Gentle Joe. Holding the light so that one could obtain a better view of his countenance she studied long and earnestly the features that never changed under the fixed, inquiring gaze.

When the little lady stepped backward with something like a sigh, he only uttered his customary laugh, and then was silent.

“Speak,” she said. “There is something about you that arouses an old-time memory. What is it? Who are you? There is more than chance in this meeting.”

“Don't loose the strings of your heart, then, and slop over. There is a bare possibility that you may be mistaken and I don't want any heartrending errors. Everybody lately seems to know me for somebody else; who do you think that I am?”

“I don't think, I know. You are Caton Ormsby, and the renegade husband of mine that I have come all this distance, and put myself in all this danger, to see. I was right. Whoever planned this meeting knew what it was for. Now explain; and tell me what this girl has to do with it. Am I to be her friend or her enemy? A word from you will decide that.”

“Several words won't do it if I have to speak them; and as to my being a man by the name of Caton Ormsby, I guess you are away off. I wouldn't care to deny your soft impeachment if it was only true, but I am sorry to say that there must be a mistake somewhere. This is the second time that name has been plastered down on me to-night, and you are the second lady that has claimed your unworthy servant as her husband. I've got to take a stand in the matter somewhere, or get back to Utah. If you have any other outlet to suggest I'm waiting to hear it.”

The two paid no more attention to Bess Stanley than if she was a corpse, though she leaned forward, listening to their conversation with an intense eagerness. Now she suddenly laid her hand upon Lipscombe's shoulder, and stared even more earnestly into his face than Mrs. Ormsby had done.

“The truth! The truth! More depends on it than you dream. Are you indeed Caton Ormsby?”

“Another spouse in the immediate future? Really they seem to grow on every bush, and I'll swear that I own none of them and don't intend to let any of them own me. Now, who in thunder is this Caton Ormsby? If he's the right sort of man I appreciate the compliment and may pick out a wife or two and settle down. If he's not I'll know enough to repudiate the whole thing and stick to my own name.”

“Then you deny the name? This woman is nothing to you? You lay no claim to anything that is Caton Ormsby's?”

“Come, little woman, don't crowd me too far. How do I know what I want to claim? Let's all sit down and tell our stories, then we can tell better who we are and what we want to do. What do you say; and we'll throw around to see who is to begin.”

“Jest wait a minute, will yer, till ther rest ov ther menagery hes arrove,” said a voice at the door, which Mrs. Ormsby had no difficulty in recognizing as belonging to Royal George. “Don't show any sign ov nonsense in thar er we'll hev ter shoot. Hyar's ther real, genooine Mrs. Ormsby; an' ef yer goin' ter hev any discourse take her inter ther ring. When yer git through you kin all take me inter yer confidences an' tell me how yer made out. Look out, she's a-comin'.”

Then the door was swung open and another woman was ushered into the room.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO MEN THAT PLAYED THE LIMIT.

As the other Mrs. Ormsby, propelled by a shove that was by no means gentle, staggered

across the floor, the light was again let down from above, and the room fairly well illuminated.

The only one who seemed totally unconcerned was Gentle Joe, and, as every one about Blazer's knew, an earthquake wouldn't phase him.

“Really, madame, this is an unexpected pleasure. Allow me. You will find them all very pleasant people when you once get acquainted with them. Mrs. Ormsby, Mrs. Ormsby. This is Miss Bess Stanley, and this—ah! my eyes don't deceive me, though I had overlooked him till this minute—this is a Hurley, though I can't just recall his front name. Some relative of the Hurley who was so anxious to let a gleam of daylight through yours truly this evening. Shake, pard. We're in a heap of trouble, and with all this calico hanging to our coat-tails the chances to get out don't look as brilliant as one could wish. If they haven't corraled us all here to cut our throats there has been a heap of time wasted that might have been put to a better use. No one speaks, eh? Well, all right. Let's hold Quaker meeting and maybe the fellow outside will say something. Anything for a lead. Then I'll know whether to trump or follow suit.”

“The fellow outside” was evidently listening, and he spoke up briskly:

“You're ther boy fur a suggestion. Couldn't a hit it better fur a lead ef yer hed been a-lookin' over my shoulder inter my hand. Some whar er other thar's a mill-yun, more er less, ez are a-hangin' on ther turn. I've got 'em all cooped ez hez a share in ther plunder, an' when I kin pick out ther one ez will divvy up ther squarest with Royal George, I'll know what ter do with ther balance. They won't hev no use fur fortunes, ner a share in ther frolic; but I'll bespeak ther handsomest kinder tombstones fur them ez doesn't survive. Fix it all up atwixt yerselves an' when ye'r ready ter put in yer proposals lemme know. I ain't a-boardin' yer all fer nothin'; bet yer sweet lives I ain't.”

“All right, George, if you think so,” responded the cheerful voice of Gentle Joe. “Pity you've made one little mistake. It always makes me sad when a man flips up on four aces, and I weep when he loses money over a sure thing.”

“An' what's ther trouble now, Gentle Joe. Ain't I got ther dead wood on the gang?”

“The wood is dead enough, my friend; but the trouble is, you have the wrong Mr. Ormsby. If you leave him out of the box the town is going to be dead against you, whichever way you play it.”

“Don't worry about that. Ef there's ary more Ormsbys a-goin' we'll hev 'em all scooped in by this time ter-morrer night; an' then we'll be ready ter tork bizzness. Good-night. Ye'r all in a safe place; an' ef yer know what's good fer yer you'll do lots ov sleepin'; an' durned leetle chinnin'; you folks can't agree nohow. Ef you should need anything durin ther night jest ring ther bell an' you'll hev some one round.”

“Pleasant,” remarked Lipscombe, as they heard the noise of retreating footsteps.

“The infernal scoundrel means every word he says, or I don't know beans when the bag's untied. His voice somehow sounds familiar enough, but blamed if I can place him. Wish I could see his face.”

“I know him; and that only too well,” ground out the younger Mrs. Ormsby.

“When it will do you any good I can tell you all of his life. It was his treachery that brought me here. It is too monstrous to believe that he intends me any evil; yet what else can I think? Nevertheless, his advice is all the better, since he did not intend us to take it. I shall go to sleep. To-morrow he will have something to say, and we will listen to it. A thousand in hand is worth a hundred thousand in the bush. If you have any coin to jingle for him it will not be hard to buy your freedom, all. Then we can fight this matter to the bitter end.”

Without another word she drew off the heavy coat she wore, and wrapping it up to make a pillow she threw herself gracefully down in one corner, not even vouchsafing a good-night to Hurley, who cast a singular glance at her as she drew away.

The other two women, who had been listening, but saying nothing, followed her ex-

ample, leaving the two men alone, and facing each other.

“Come,” said Lipscombe. “The night is young, and there's nothing else to do, what say you to a little game? These are the most accommodating road-agents you ever saw. They've left me all my plunder. If you're in the same fix we may have an interesting time after all.”

“Correct you are. If you have such a thing as a deck about you, there's a chance for fun yet. I'm tolerably well heeled, as far as coin goes; and as I guess they'll gobble it all, sooner or later, we may as well have some fun while it lasts. Everything looks as though it had just been laid out for us.”

“Cards! That's what I travel on. I'm the boss flipper of the Rockies, and can scoop your wealth about as fast as you can count it out. Here goes! We'll throw around for deal, and I'll play you for anything less than a million.”

All the prisoners took the situation with remarkable coolness; these two with something that was more than wonderful. With the women out of the way, everything was nicely set for a struggle at cards, and at that each of them was a chief.

Almost directly under the light was a table, on each side of which was a rude seat. The two dropped down, and Gentle Joe produced a pack of cards which was but little the worse for usage.

“What's it to be? Name your variety,” he exclaimed, when, after a skillful preliminary shuffle, he tossed the cards over to be cut.

“One game is the same as another to me. I profess to be an expert from the East. If you have any preference for seven-up or single-handed eucher, you will discover that I am there or in that neighborhood. If you want it to be old business from the first, draw-poker is good enough for any man, myself included.”

“So I should suppose. Well, there's your card and here's mine; who has it?”

“You have it and you may keep it; I wouldn't give three cents for luck that comes so early in the game. Ah! they are beginning to run my way already. I've neither ace, face nor trump; give me one.”

The cards had been dealt for “Old Sledge,” a game that once was a good deal more popular than it now seems to be. Gentle Joe looked over his hand in a careful sort of way.

“We haven't put up the stakes yet. Before we go any further it might be as well to know what we're playing for. A fellow is a little more careful if there's enough up to make it interesting. Could you name the exact amount you think you would be justified in risking on the chances of this game?”

“Oh, that's easy arranged. I always play the limit. One way or the other that finishes it out the sooner, and saves a heap of wear and tear of nerves. If you say so I guess I'll just put up all I've got. Then we can lie down to our slumbers. From the looks of things I should judge that's your plan. A heap better than to say: Hands up, and go for what you find.”

“So you think I'm in with the gang? You never were more mistaken in your life; and if you know what's good for you, play for all that's in the cards. There's a chance to make big money. There's my little boodle. Is it enough to cover your pile? I hate to draw in my horns for any man that walks on shoe-leather.”

He threw a well-filled wallet on the table, and the other at once drew out his own pocketbook, and began counting its contents.

“One thousand three hundred and forty; with a few odd, which we don't intend to bother about. How does that strike you?”

“Couldn't have hit it nearer if we had laid it all out before hand. There it is, and a few dollars more. Take your point and we'll see what there is in your hand.”

And so the singularly plucky game began.

The gift was not a bad investment, since Gentle Joe made the whole four points possible, and scored up a noble start toward winning the game.

Then Henry Hurley dealt, and Gentle Joe looked over his cards with a smile.

“I guess I'll ask for one. I don't believe it would suit you to run 'em any more than it would me. We'll risk it anyhow.”

Hurley looked disgusted as he nodded his head. He had to do it, and yet Gentle Joe had a hand that most men would have stood on. There are "big hands" in seven-up as well as in other games. The result was that they stood five apiece when the hand had been played, and it was Lipscombe's deal.

"Here, I'll give you some show for your money. Give them a shuffle before I get hold of them," he said, pushing the cards over toward his antagonist.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind letting me deal them, too?" was the cheeky query of Hurley, as he ran the cards deftly together from the ends.

"Thanks for the suggestion, but there's a limit to the amount of pork that can be purchased for a shilling, and I don't care to give my luck clean away. Here, I'll finish the agony in short order."

The cards were run off smoothly, the expected Jack turned, and the two were looking at what they had in order to decide what they would do, when they became aware that they had a spectator. Royal George, who had undoubtedly heard the greater part of their conversation, was standing at Gentle Joe's shoulder, looking at his cards with a grin of interest on his face. How he had slipped in was not so apparent, but there he was.

"Kinder strikes me that you fellers don't need ice ter keep yer heads cool. Ef I war in your place I'd be sayin' my prayers an' gittin' ready fer to-morrer. Jest finish this hyar game out, an' then let me in. Seems ter me it'd be a real pleasure ter tackle sich heavy fellers ez you be. Drive on, quick, fur I ain't much time ter spare."

"You won't have long to wait. This hand settles the whole pile. Take one, Hurley; it's the best I got."

"That's so," exclaimed Hurley, with an air of disgust. "Show a trump and take the pot."

"There's a handful of them. Sorry, pard, but really you can't play worth a cent. If the king, here, don't pan out better, he won't be common amusement."

"We'll see about that," said Royal George, dropping into a seat. "Ef thar's any two-legged critters kin lay over my game, I want ter know."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN HOUR'S GRACE.

"LET the farce proceed," answered Hurley, waving his hand in answer to an inquiring look from the road-agent, as he pushed back from the table.

"I'm dead broke now; in about five minutes this man will be broke, too; and you can turn us loose without hesitation. As the women have no money, I suppose you will be willing to include them in the arrangement. It's the coolest, cutest bit of robbery I ever heard of."

"Ef yer rattled, pull out an' keep yer mouth shut. You don't know beans, anyhow. Now, Joseph, how is this game to be?" He spoke gruffly, and in some displeasure.

"Fix that to suit yourself; but any way you fix it you can put up all you're worth that I'll play it for all that's in the cards."

"I ain't jest quite so reckless—we'll start even. Hyar's my leetle sack-full. It's ernuf ter win with, an' all I'm goin' ter lose. I don't keer fur reckless playin'; we'll try a hundred a corner, an' then it'll last longer. Wade in."

As has been intimated, Hurley was an old card-player, and as he looked at the two men setting to work, he felt that he could not be mistaken in what he saw in their faces, and wished that he had husbanded his resources. There was no mistaking the gambling gleam in the eyes of the outlaw as he counted out his stakes and then shuffled the cards. It certainly looked like a *bona fide* game, in which each side was anxious to win.

The deal fell to Royal George, and he made the most of it. Each played with deliberation, and after the work had fairly begun, neither face showed the shadow of a change.

Contrary to Hurley's expectations, Gentle Joe won the first game, the second and the third. Either it was going to be a long sitting, or the money went with the merit. The fourth game went to Royal George, but the

fifth and sixth to Lipscombe. The wealth he was accumulating began to amount to quite a respectable little fortune. It looked like a square game to Hurley, and he was a judge of such matters.

Then the seventh game began, with the opening hands in Lipscombe's favor.

"That's good enough for me," he said, as he gathered up the cards from Royal George's deal and looked at the deck-head. "Play your game and play it steady, if you don't want to go down into your stocking. I'm on the war-path to-night, and it takes a boss to tackle me."

For the first time the outlaw's face gave signs of his inward emotion. He was losing, and he was a bad loser.

Hurley, looking at him, no longer had doubts, and began to think that a crisis in their affairs was very near.

Royal George was no match for the silky little gambler, and was more than half inclined to resent the wonderful run of luck that would have set at defiance the best of play.

When he turned to Gentle Joe he saw something else.

He was handling his cards with one hand, while the other rested carelessly on the table, but pointing toward Royal George in a way that, to Hurley, was more than suspicious. If there was not a derringer concealed in that sleeve, it seemed, in the light of a lengthy experience, to be more than singular. If he had known Gentle Joe's record from A to Izzard, he could not have been more certain.

"That's your low," remarked Joe, as the cards came out, "and here's your high, and your jack, safe as a church, and it's hardly necessary to count for game. Your deal, and we'll put up for a new game."

His right arm remained extended in the same careless way, while with his left hand he gathered in the stakes.

"Guess not. I don't kick on a fair game, but I don't go more ner so fur when luck's dead ag'in' me. I reckon ther way ther keerds run ter-night you'd bankrupt ther hull gang, ef they hed ole Flood ter back 'em. I'll lose jest so much with any of 'em, but I don't go a cent more, nohow. I've swore it more ner once. I hev yer hyar, though, an' ef it looks ez though luck hed changed by to-morrer mornin' I'll give ye another hitch. It's a mighty big pile ov boodle, an' 'tain't everybody ez would keer ter hev it about 'em with sich a gang around."

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, evidently taking in the gang that kept ward without.

"You're right about that last, old man, but I'll run the risks. And I'll tell you what I'll do with you. I'll put up the whole pile against an hour's grace on the road to Blazer's; and I'll let Hurley here throw around and the first jack takes the rake. If you've got any sand now is the time to set up a sack full."

"An' ef yer win, nothin's ter be said 'bout this hyar leetle game, an' what's goin' on hyar?"

The gambling fever was on the road-agent bad.

"What do you take me for? Ain't I trusting you—and don't you think I'm just as square? It's my night on, and I feel it in my bones. It's my offer—take it or leave it. I ain't sure but what, from the way I left the burg, I'm in more danger in Blazer's than I am here; but I'll risk it anyhow."

"Done, then, an' double done. Put up ther oro an' I'll see that there's no shenanigan."

As he spoke he drew from his belt a pair of revolvers; but when he looked up from their rising hammers he saw that Gentle Joe, from some unseen receptacle, had drawn a similar pair, and was looking at him over the pile of notes and coin that flooded the table. He no longer relied on the hidden derringer.

"You observe I'm not making a threat, or saying a word how things ought to be done; but as you're looking after your interests, I'm looking after mine; and Hurley can be sure of fair play all the way 'round."

Instead of being angered, Royal George burst into a laugh. It was a harsh one, but it was hearty.

"That's the kind of talk I like to hear—right to the point, and the bark all on. Go on with the deal. Gentle Joe don't shoot fur

glory any more, an' ef he can't be trusted with fire arms, who kin?"

"Who cuts?" asked Hurley. The game was beginning to get interesting. It looked as though, sooner or later, there would be pistols for two or three, and his regrets were deeper than ever that they had so effectually deprived him of his fire-arms at the time of his capture. For the present he was simply a puppet to dance as these two men ordered. The question that was most important to his mind was, which was the better master? He took possession of the deck as he asked himself the question, and methodically began to shuffle.

"I guess that's my percentage," responded Royal George. "Ef thar war ary goug'in' it stands ter reason it'd be in the interest ov Joe, an' I reckon he's too squar' a man ter want ter hev it all his own way. Pass 'em over this way, an' I'll lift ther top keerds fur good luck."

When the cut had been made the slender white fingers of Hurley threw off the cards one at a time, first to the left and then to the right, and for a little while nothing was heard but the compressed breathing of the men, and the regular flip, flip of the pasteboards as they dropped upon the table.

"Ah!"

Gentle Joe was too thoroughpaced a gambler to allow a sign to escape him, but Royal George, trained in a somewhat different school, could not restrain the low exclamation. Then he watched Lipscombe as, without the least haste or excitement, he gathered up the stakes and thrust them carelessly in the side-pockets of his sack coat.

"It war a nerry sort ov game you played all through," was the outlaw's comment, "an' not one man in a thousand would 'a' took ther risk ez cool. Gamblin' are gamblin' though, an' Royal George's word are ez good ez any man's bond. When he loses yer never hear him squeal. That hour'll begin ter run purty shortly; are yer ready ter slide?"

"All set, George; and I've found you just as white as I always said you were. If you want your revenge, I'll meet you anywhere on the continent and put up dollar for dollar while the pile lasts. Now, I'd like to say good-night, and pull out my prettiest for the Bar. If I don't get in before daylight they'll be apt to wing me as I come."

"All right; but afore yer go are ther' anyone else ez knows this ranch like you do? Ther' might 'a' bin a heap ov trouble ef ther wrong man hed 'a' got in."

"Don't worry. Me and my pard—that's all there is of us, and we don't talk."

All of Hurley's old doubts came back as he saw the two rise from the table together, and yet if this game had been but a farce the acting of it looked very real. For the present he accepted the position under protest, and saw the two depart without even a good-night.

He saw them depart; that is, he saw them rise up, and heard their vanishing footsteps and the sound of a closing door; but before they had made their exit through the door to their prison pen the light above once more disappeared, and he was left alone in the darkness, with the three slumbering women.

The last words he heard were from Royal George:

"I'll trust yer, pard, fur I don't go back on my word over a prayer book; but ef you go back on me it won't be no use ter pray fur yer soul. I won't leave none ter pray fur. Now, git. Yer time starts, an' you'd better start too."

CHAPTER XXII.

NEDDY'S JUNGLE.

It is almost needless to say that Gentle Joe found his way back in safety to Blazer's Bar, making about the best time on record for the distance. It was a little before daylight when he silently crawled into his shanty, and lay down to slumber. The notes and gold in his pockets were very real; but the balance of his adventures seemed no more than a troubled dream. When he awoke it was well toward evening; and without hesitation, after a plain though plentiful supper, he turned his face toward Nddy's Jungle.

"Nddy's Jungle" was one of the institutions at Blazer's; where they drank, gambled

and shot with a perfect looseness; and when the town was in process of being painted red the preliminaries generally began there or thereabouts.

There were several reasons why Gentle Joe should make his re-enter there; but it was an odd place for Mr. Cathcart to come strolling into with his most innocent air; though it was hard to say whether he was surprised or not when a hand clapped him on the shoulder; and looking around he saw Lipscombe.

"See here, old man, I reckon you're pretty square, and so I'll give you a word of warning. This is no place for you; and the best thing you can do is to go back to Andy's, and stay there till you get ready to leave the town. It looks as though there will be a heap of killing before they get through; and as you're a stranger, as like as not they will begin with you."

"Thank you, whether that is a warning or a threat; after the specimen of the love the town bears you, as shown by the row last night, I should suppose it would be your own precious health you would be looking after. Or have you made it square with the ruffians of the camp?"

"I don't 'square' things with anybody; but paddle my own canoe and risk the breakers. I just got in, and from the way the boys are squinting I wouldn't be surprised if there would be a circus by and by, but that's my lookout. They may carry on the joke or they may let it drop; but either way won't help you any. You may be treading on toes that you haven't seen yet. If you are—look out for an awful squall. You may only be getting it in for Gentle Joe—if so, and you don't take warning, you'll be apt to feel something drop. And don't gamble on one thing. As between you and me, and your affairs and my affairs, the town won't help you worth a cent."

"Perhaps, as far as the camp goes you may be correct—the social code here, or what passes for such, is about as lax as any one could well imagine—but there is a man known by the name of Singular Sam, who has a special interest in the young lady named Stanley, who, I believe is his niece. Whatever the town may feel disposed to do, he will be apt to press an investigation to its utmost; and call any and every one engaged in the outrage of her abduction to a strict account."

"Ain't you a little previous? It is not at all certain that there has been any outrage. Pray remember that you are in Blazer's Bar, where things are run, as you allow, on a different schedule from the eastern ones with which you are acquainted. Of course it is of no earthly interest to me what view you take of the thing, but as an apparent friend of Mrs. Ormsby's it looks like the correct thing to give you a word of warning."

"Then you admit that there may be some truth in the statements you so utterly denied last night? It looks more and more as though my suspicions were correct. And yet, outside of personal feeling, I cannot see that you have any interest in her removal. In fact, I should think it would be the other way, unless you have some intelligence that we are unaware of."

Gentle Joe gave a light laugh.

"So you're willing to feel for me in spite of what you think I am. That's business; but I guess you and I can't hitch teams. When we do it will be on some other racket than this. You go talk it up first with Singular Sam, and see what he says. He's the man for your pard. I couldn't come in without injuring my reputation."

"Ah, you begin to see that I have an interest that may be in line with that of Singular Sam? Ahem! Well, of the two I think I would prefer your assistance. It's a toss up, of course; but when it comes to honesty of purpose you have rather the better eye. What do you say? Is it too late to arrange for a campaign together?"

"You don't spread the butter on very thick, and I guess you're not more than half trying. Anyway, you and I can't be pards; but I don't want you to get in the way so that I'll have to set you out. You may be honest enough, but you're bound to be on the wrong side. That's more of a warning than I generally give; but you're a stranger here, and I want to do the square thing. If you're wise you won't crowd me after that."

"But if you would listen it might be for the interest of everybody concerned. I don't think a man of your caliber cares to live in this country a day longer than he has to, and we might come to some sort of a compromise. There's money enough in it for all hands, even if you're not the original Jacobs, as I half believe you are."

"There's where you're fooled, as well as Mrs. Ormsby. I can't do you any good; and may do you a heap of harm. But you stay out, anyhow, till the lady gets back. Maybe she'll have a point; and anyway it will save a heap of trouble. So long."

"A moment, if you please. I believe I said nothing about Mrs. Ormsby's absence. If you know of it, you may know more. Last night there were loud threats on account of Bess Stanley; add another item of the same sort, and the Bar might rise at you in earnest. You had better make terms while you can."

"Thanks; but you can't peddle goods unless you've got something to sell; and as for the Bar—let her rise. There's Mart Hammers now. I judge he's heard I'm back, and wants to get in his work while he can do it on the square. If you think the fun is going to pay for the pleasure, wait and see it out. I think I can promise that the first stray bullet will come your way."

"Do you mean that you—"

"Oh, no," laughed Joe, with a shake of his handsome head. "I don't have any stray bullets; I don't shoot often; but when I do, they go for good and keep. I don't care whether I live or die, and so the chances are rather in my favor; but you want to live, and that makes it sure that you will be gathered in. Now, clear out. If you chip after my warning, down you go."

The last few words were spoken in a more resolute tone of voice than he had yet used, and then Joe turned in time to face Mart Hammers, who was slowly sidling toward him, with three or four men at his back.

"What is it, Mart? Just note my hands are in my pockets, though I don't want to shoot unless I have to. Judge Lynch don't generally hold office for more than twenty-four hours, and if you're after me about the little racket at the Golden Lamb last night, you'd better let it blow over anyhow. It wasn't much of a breeze after all."

"Don't be quick on the trigger, Joe; I ain't after you for nothin', 'cept yer own good. You got it purty straight then, an' we tho't yer hed took ther warnin' an' clared out. It wa'n't a wise thing, an' it wa'n't a safe thing fur you ter kim back. They gin'rally hang a man right up on sight when he goes ag'in' ther town, an' treats Jedge Lynch with contempt. Not ter say that I think that way; but I tho't if I could speak to yer quiet like, mebbe you'd keer ter save yer neck, an' ther camp a heap ov trouble, by quietly goin' out ag'in, an' stayin' out."

"See here, Mart, they're putting you up for a figure-head because they know I like you, and think I won't shoot; but like or no like, if you crowd, down you go."

"Jest what I heard yer a-tellin' ov ther other man. But, Joe, I can't help it, an' I can't help you any ef yer don't take my advice an' git, an' git quick. Ef they once begin talkin' Bess Stanley ag'in yer, salt won't save yer; though I ain't never b'lieved yer war no sich man ez that. What's it goin' ter be?"

"You can bet I'm here to stay, and the rest you can fix to suit yourself."

"That ain't no kind ov talk," growled one of the men who had come with Hammers. "Jest snatch him bald-headed, an' we'll kerry out ther coffin."

"Don't, Dave; you make me tired. You want to live, don't you, and I have observed that men who talk that way generally die a violent death, not long after."

"What kin you do ag'in' six, with ther hull town a-back ov us? Hands up, Joe, an' no nonsense."

"Thanks for the warning. Don't try to draw that weapon, Dave; here's all the big trumps in my hands, and no show for you to take a trick. Hold on, I say, hold on!"

The hands of the men were all on their revolvers, so that they had but to draw and cock them. At the warning they knew enough to wait, for at the same instant up came the terrible revolvers of the little man

from Jumptown. It was a sight to see him pull."

"I guess you've got me foul," rumbled Dave Dukely, who was not notorious for the amount of sand he showed when held at a disadvantage, "but after ther way yer took water las' night we know yer ain't goin' ter try ter fight the Bar. Better draw in yer horns 'fore it's too late."

"Ha, ha! So Gentle Joe took water, did he? Don't gamble too much on what he did then until you know the reason why. I've been around these regions for some time, and no man can say he ever heard of my breaking my word, or missing my aim when I was in earnest. I'm in earnest now. If you fellows want a circus, say the word. The first move and I'll cut loose for all I'm worth, and if any man gets a shot in before I have three or four barrels empty I'm willing to go up the flume. Sabbe?"

The laugh went out of his tones as he spoke, and there was a steely glint in his eyes that showed he was in deadly earnest.

And when Gentle Joe was in earnest there was no discount on his industry. Dave Dukely knew that he would be elected sure; and the rest of the little crowd at Mart Hammers's back had pretty strong suspicions. The rest, as yet, had not made it their concern.

Mart was the coolest and the coldest; perhaps because he was the nearest approach to an honest man there.

"Look hyar, Joe, it's not me that's speakin', but the town behind me. Ef they say git, bein' ez how I've took on me ter run things, how kin I help sayin' go? Thar may be wuss men right down hyar in Blazer's, but they ain't 'fore the court. We're tryin' ter let yer down easy, an' I hope yer don't s'pose it's a pers'nal matter a'twixt me an' you."

"Not between you and me, Mart. You're just old honesty, and nothing shorter. But about the time I got started on the road to Jumptown, some of these fellows that have been scooping the pilgrims would take a sitting shot at me, without leaving a chance to hit back. I don't want to bluff you, Mart, because you won't bluff worth a cent, and my old hold would be a snap-shot, plumb center; but there's a little infernal bad company behind you, and if you'll just pull out a bit, you'll have a chance to see them kick if they crowd me."

It was wonderful how he kept the half-dozen covered as he spoke. Mart Hammers and his men were bunched together by themselves, but they made a reasonably large squad for one man to handle, and they all bad.

"Ye'r' onreasonable, Joe. Ther hull camp is ag'in' yer—"

"Don't fool yourself, Mart. You're only talking for a section of it that's putting you up to rake their chestnuts. Go 'round and count noses again. Take a square vote, and then come and tell me Blazer's has gone back on me, and we'll start fresh. Right here's a smart sprinkling of voters, but they don't seem anxious to speak up; and I guess you'll find it that way all over town."

"Mebbe ye'r' right," responded Hammers, in a moderate tone, as he looked around him. "They did seem very sot on it down-street, but they don't 'pear ter be so anxious hyer. Ef I thort it war so, I'd give yer ther benefit of ther doubt till I could see furder."

"Oh, I'm not begging off, and I'm not running away. You can't miss anything but a coffin by giving me a square shake, and when you come back you'll find just as good a business-opening as ever. Take it or leave it, and talk quick. You're in the biggest mistake you ever saw, and I want to get you out of it."

"Blamed ef I don't do it, Joe; but ef ther town rises at yer, that's another show, an' yer must look out fur yerself."

"That's all right, Mart; I'm easy now. Does any other part of the town that is here want to rise? because if she does, it's just too lovely a chance fer anything."

Joe's words fell clear and quick, and he stepped toward Dave Dukely and the pards that backed him, as though he would only be too willing to fight the gang.

"Not ter-night, Joe, but some other night. Dave Dukely ain't burnin' his fingers jest now, when your gang are holdin' ther jungle."

"A square back-down for you, David. All right. Ta-ta; I'll see you later."

And with careless grace he strode right through the crowd toward a dark-faced stranger, who, he saw, was standing in the door and beckoning to attract his attention.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ELENA EXPRESSES HERSELF.

THE younger Mrs. Ormsby opened her eyes and looked around as composedly as could well be expected under the circumstances.

What the hour was could only be a matter of guess-work since without the light, that came and went through the ceiling in a way that was not so apparent, the place was shrouded in darkness. From the way she felt, however, the little lady suspected it was full daylight in the world outside.

If it was desired to keep the party corralled in quiet no better plan could have been devised; yet, as she yawned and stretched her arms, the light flashed down again, and she could once more see her surroundings.

Harry Hurley at almost the same moment raised himself to a sitting posture, and stared around.

At first he did not seem to understand exactly where he was, and he dropped his hand to his hip in an instinctive way that showed he was no tyro in the carrying of fire-arms.

The finding of the pocket empty brought him to his senses, and in a flash he remembered all the occurrences of the previous night. At once he got up and walked over to his feminine friend, who had been staring at him with rather a quizzical look on her face. She was in the best of humor if he was not.

"From your face I should say that you are inclined to laugh. If there is anything funny about this, some ludicrous point that I can't see, supposing you tell me so that I can laugh too. I swear, I begin to wish I was well out of it; and I am about as reckless as they generally make them."

"Oh no, Harry, I'm not laughing at you at all. I think, perhaps, we are in more danger even than we have thought, but I really cannot help being a little amused when I look around and see us woe-begone wretches cooped up here—three women to one man, and then think how nicely I have been fooled."

"Mr. Ormsby also seemed amused last night, and in more ways than one. He smiled to see you here, and laughed outright when he made the big strike on seven-up."

"I'm not as sure about the first part of that as I was last night. I'd almost swear to his face, but his voice and his age don't correspond. The fact is, I had a hint from our friend, whom you know as Royal George, and I jumped at the conclusion, Caton may be dead after all. If not I may as well give it up for good, get a divorce, and help you make a fortune some other time. I don't believe there's much left in this."

"And who in the name of wonder is this Royal George?"

"You can't prove it by me. Some time before I met you, sir, I saw him. He told me that he had been on the track of Caton Ormsby—he would not reveal how he knew that I had any interest in him—and that if I came when he sent for me, he would furnish proof of his death, and other papers for a liberal percentage. As he advanced liberally on the strength of it, and I was just then out of an engagement, I agreed to the proposal. It was after that that I stumbled across the other Mrs. Ormsby, and now here I find her again. To tell the Gospel truth, those two women are worst of all. I'm not sure but that George intends to cut my throat and step one of them into my shoes."

"You are not in earnest?"

"Very much in earnest. The only redeeming feature is that they will have to kill off Caton Ormsby first, wherever he may be, and he is hard to slay. Up to that time they won't be so particular about his widow, but after that—if they really mean to go for the Ormsby find—I'm afraid they will be willing to take the best material for their purposes, and I suppose I don't altogether fill the bill."

"You still insist that all that work last night was *bona fide*, and that the man you called your husband and this mountain outlaw are not in partnership?"

"I mean to say all that, and more when the time comes. But really you are getting impertinent. I would scarcely try to deceive you. I know that it must be a shock, but on my soul I thought that I knew that he was dead, and only wanted to get the legal proof of it. What do you think? I can't have the earth. I must give up one or the other, for the present. Are you worth more than the Ormsby fortune?"

She was certainly a very lovely looking woman, and as the low murmur fell from her lips, and she looked up at him with a pouting smile on her ripe full lips, it was no wonder that Henry Hurley, cold-blooded sharp that he was, felt a thrill of genuine unselfish passion.

"For the present? There is something in that. I swear that I am honest—with you. There's no man living that is worth a million, and precious few women. You are one of them, and I believe in you. Give me your promise and I can wait."

"Pity that Mr. Ormsby did not have the same view of my value. I believe in your honesty, especially as you are willing to take both beyond peradventure, and meantime you can get neither. Don't frown. I don't want to offend you, but when I talk I'm apt to deal in the frozen truth. You tell a little of it now. Honor bright, which would you take if you had the choice of but one?"

"You, beyond a doubt. I am not sure that I could decide quickly; but as I am very much in love I suppose I might eventually make up my mind to about the same thing."

"I think it is the fear of that agitating the mind of Royal George, that has brought us into this box. Your appearance was a thunder-stroke. I see no way to explain it, and the best thing to do will be to run away if we get the chance."

"And if we don't get the chance?"

"Look out for your throat. I will take as good care as I know how of mine; and it will need it. I needn't tell you that we are in a heap of danger."

"And these other women; who are they?"

"Can't say. They may be subsequent wives or they may be rank impostors. Anyway, they are not our friends, whatever they may be to Royal George. Keep cool, and perhaps we may be able to find out."

"I'm more interested in getting out."

For once the gambler began to crawlfish the least bit. He was in deep water and could not see which way to strike out. It might be that he would be harming the woman that, for the time at least, he really loved, and that beyond redemption. He knew that there were ties between her and the road-agent, and that more than likely, had it not been for his interference in the game, she would have been safe from bodily harm, and most likely have been the chosen, as she was the rightful claimant to the Ormsby fortune—provided the Ormsby himself, in whom the title really rested, had actually been dead. Now, the only hope was to, in some way, escape.

He looked around, as he had done a dozen times or more before, but with solid rock on every side save where the heavy doors barred their exit, the outlook did not seem very encouraging. In addition, he saw that their two fellow-prisoners had opened their eyes; and were watching them with a hungry sort of curiosity. Seeing that they were observed, Bess Stanley turned her face toward the wall; but the other Mrs. Ormsby came forward.

"Whether we are to be friends or foes," she said, "you certainly will not hesitate, if you know it, to tell me the meaning of this? Why are we brought together here? who is it that has planned and carried out this outrage? You may be sure that sooner or later it will be dearly paid for."

"I don't think it advisable to threaten until you are fairly out of the woods," was the cold answer. "You ought to be able to guess out a pretty good set of answers to all those questions. If you claim to be Mrs. Caton Ormsby you should know enough about the gentleman to be aware that he is capable of a great deal more. Perhaps he has placed us here to be held until he gets a good start; maybe he has only offered a fair price for our being put out of the way. If you wanted any further information you should have got it from him last night. I've been looking for him some years and this is

the first time I have even imagined I had got near him. If he continues to be as hard to find I should judge that you would die of old age before you strike him again. You and I haven't much love for each other; and the more we talk the bigger our quarrel will be apt to be. I think the best plan would be to say nothing until after we have had breakfast. Maybe, then, we can stand on the same platform a while, without gushing; but just now I feel like taking your head off, and I guess you're in the same box. If a nod isn't good enough, beware when I have to wink."

As neither trusted the other it was not likely that their conversation would be very genial; and the advice was so good that it was a wonder that it was taken. It was, though; showing that the elder of the two was a woman of plenty of good sense. She bowed, remarked that she thought so herself, and then sat down sullenly to wait for the next development, which came in the shape of one of the outlaws with a fairly plentiful breakfast for four.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ROYAL GEORGE BEGINS TO STIR HIS "ANAMILES."

BREAKFAST meant daylight outside, sure; it was almost as good as though Royal George had carried in a clock. The prisoners, being people of considerably more than less sense, enjoyed their opportunity, laying by a large fund of surplus vitality in the shape of a good, square meal, that was afterward well digested.

So far, no great amount of insult and very little bodily harm had been offered, and the prisoners were getting into a more placid frame of mind.

The seeming respect of the outlaws who served the breakfast was reassuring, though it was evident that they had received orders not to speak a word outside the line of their duty, and to keep a sharp lookout for any attempt to escape.

After a while, Royal George himself came in.

He was well armed, and as the door opened to admit him, Hen Hurley had a glimpse of several figures without—men, doubtless, ready to rush in at a signal. The outlaw had his prisoners, and intended to keep them.

"Good-mornin', friends! Dropped in ter see that you war all alive an' bloomin'. Ef thar's ary complaints I'm right hyar now, an' you kin spit 'em out. Bin treated square, ain't yer? No one a-treadin' on yer toes er steppin' on yer coat-tails—eh?"

He stared around with a good-natured grin on his battered face. To look at him one would hardly suppose him to be the desperate road-agent that was making for himself a record that stopped one's breath to listen to.

His guests heard him, but they made no answer. Such questions as those meant something, and it required time to digest them. A wrong answer could be followed by a shot, and they were hardly asked without a purpose.

"All quiet, my daisies. Royal George's caravan hez nothin' but well-tamed beasts fer attractions. Thet's right; I'll do ther talkin'! Ef ten hours hez subdued 'em that fur, thar's no tellin' what a week er so kin bring 'round. It's takin' big risks—fur thar's no doubt thar's a dozen trailers a-lookin' over ther ground, an' ef they found this spot, thar's no tellin' but what they'd be able ter raise ther hull Bar at us. Let 'em come, though. I ain't spilin' fur a fight—not yit. When I git right down ter ther fine p'int, an' know ther hull road clean through, an' they say so; mebbe they kin count me in. I'raps yer' askin' fur why these things be thusly? Don't yer do it. Ef yer don't deserve it yer sha'n't be hurt, an' that's good ernuf fur you."

Brilliant Bess, with the most experience in the ways of Blazer's, and its mysteries, was the one most deeply moved. She stared at the speaker as though trying to pierce a veil, and her fingers worked convulsively. She was torn with a struggle to speak, and a struggle to keep silent. Elena—the younger Mrs. Ormsby—watching her as much as the outlaw, was interested, after her airy, careless way. She laid her hand lightly on the arm of the girl.

"Don't you do it, little one; don't you do it. He is breaking out in a new place, and it's fun to watch him, and wonder what it means; but ask no questions. When the time comes he will show his hand. If you try to see it sooner he will call it foul and may begin to shoot. No. I would let Royal George have his own way. Only—he puzzles me."

Hen Hurley sat back a little from the rest, biting at a straw, and scarcely seeming to listen. He could guess very easily why he had been taken in, and felt no call to ask questions. The game had been running against him so steadily from the start that it was hardly worth while to bother about the cues. All this was no concern of his. He had been scooped in the net because he had followed his destiny—in the shape of Elena. To be sure, at times, he felt a mad, unreasoning hate for the man known as Mordaunt Mortimer; but it was useless to speculate on who that man was, or why he had offered to aid Mrs. Ormsby in her search. All that made no difference—until they got out again.

It was something of a surprise when Royal George turned to him.

"You've followed ther pasteboards long ernuf ter know that a man never gits a streak ov real, hog luck except when he ain't a lookin' fur it. It war that way when I took yer in. I wouldn't 'a' knowed yer from a side ov sole-leather tacked round a pine stump; but fu'st Ned the Nailer, an' then Gentle Joe, give me a p'int, 'till I got it all down fine. Ez yer may remark, I'm the best natured cut-throat yer ever see'd; an' ef yer give me fair play yer won't furgit it. You've a brother out hyar, in these regions, an' I want yer ter soothe his dyin' bed, an' tell him 'bout mother, home, an' friends, so ez he kin hev a comfortable send-off. Ef yer wants ter see Jess alive, I'm consentin' to ther interview."

"What's that you say?" inquired the handsome sharp. "Wasn't it enough that you had me corraled here; but you had to take in poor Jess?"

"So Jess is yer brother. Thankee, I didn't know it afore; but now I'm sure ov it, an' I'll be governed accordin'. D'yer want ter see him?"

"Of course. Can I?"

"I dunno. He needs yer bad ernuf; but I can't say ez I keer ter reesk it. Ef I say yes, what yer got ter say back ag'in?"

"Nothing. Jess wouldn't thank me to come with fettered hands. I knew he was in this region somewhere; but I didn't expect to find him here. All I'll promise is that—as you have treated him so I will treat you."

"Not another word, pard. Dot that right down an' hold her thar. Thet's all I ask; er'most all. An' I won't say not ter run away; but I will say, ef yer do I'll git yer both ag'in sure, an' level ther hull thing up accordin'. When a tough like me sez that, you kin bet yer pile he don't break his word. Kim, now, I'll take yer to him. He's bin mighty sickly, but that don't count. When he gits 'round all right—as git he will—we'll talk it all up. Till that time I want yer hyar."

"And here you will find me. Lead on. I'll swear to follow quietly."

"Hyar goes; an' you women folks kin talk it all up too while we're gone. An' Lena, see thet yer don't give yerself too much away. You're a mighty purty lectle lady, but yer hes a tendency ter be purty much ov a fool at odd times. Sabbe?"

Royal George seemed to put perfect confidence in his prisoner. He stalked ahead of him without once looking backward, and the half dozen men they passed scarcely glanced at the two.

The mountain retreat was of some extent, and was a work of nature, aided by art, that, under other circumstances, would have excited the admiration of the gambler. Now he was too busy with his own thoughts and anxieties to give it more than a passing thought. The chief carried a torch, and by its flaring light Hurley followed through a low, narrow passage, that several times widened out into small rooms. A light ahead at last told him that they had about reached the present end of their journey.

Jess Hurley was there, and in no apparent danger of immediate death. He looked up

at the two, and recognized his brother without much emotion, in spite of the fact that he was totally unprepared for the meeting.

"Got you too, have they? What's the meaning of all this? Blame me if I know—and confound me if I care much. It's rough on you though, for I'll swear that you're not mixed in any of my affairs. Perhaps they just brought you here to give me a hand-shake before I start over the range, and then they'll turn you loose. If so, I'm much obliged."

He turned an odd look on the chief, who stood in the background watching the meeting without much sign of curiosity.

"Not a bit ov it," was his answer. "I brought him ter nurse yer through—we ain't time ter do it, an' I want you bad. Him an' me kin settle accounts on our own bill ov lading. I've got an item ag'in him, but that'll keep."

"Don't worry yerself about nursing; I'm not hurt as bad as I look. Give me plenty of grub and a sprinkle of water now and then and I can paddle my own canoe into clear water. But I'm glad ter see Hank, and ef you'll leave us alone tergether ther time won't pass so slow. Come, now, you seem to be a jolly sort of an old crab—what is it? If you mean biz, now's as good a time as any to get down to bed-rock."

"Sorry ter keep yer in suspense, but I can't go ahead till I git ther rest ov ther menagery hyar, an' I'm beginnin' ter be afeard they won't come. About ter-morrer'll be time ernuf. Ef they don't show then I'll throw 'round ther keards an' see what sort of a hand I kin deal yer. Mebbe yer didn't know a man by ther name of Ili Stanley arter all?"

Hurley gave a start at the name. His wound had weakened him more than he was willing to confess, and his nerves were not under their usual good subjection.

"That's ernuf. Don't say a word—ef yer mean ther lie about it. I see yer did. Mebbe yer kin tell his darter a thing er two she's a-dyin' ter know about; but I won't ax yer no more. If it's all ther same ter you, we'll leave that till ther time kims, too. Mebbe I'd better get Gentle Joe 'round ag'in ter help tell ther story."

The mention of Lipscombe's name moved the man more than the name of the other. His white face flushed somewhat, and a frown came to his forehead.

"I've no great love for Gentle Joe, and he's as bad as they make 'em, but I'll stick to ther truth if it breaks me all up. As far as I know, Joe Lipscombe had nothing to do with the old man, or the story as I heard it. When I get clear of this, if I ever do, I'll settle with him on my own account; but I swear I won't put up a job on him to save my neck or break his."

"What is that you are talking about?" interposed Henry Hurley. "Who was Ili Stanley, and what has Jess, here, got to do with him? If you want any points on the old man, come to me."

"You?"

"Yes, to me. You may think it a little odd for a man 'way back east trying to give you points on what is happening under your nose; but I happen to be posted, and I can tell all I know without going back on any one that I need care about. The pard that posted me is dead, and the rest of the gang didn't treat him so well that he need care how hard the story cuts into any of them."

"It's a bargain!" said the outlaw suddenly, and interrupting Jess, who was about to speak. "Ef you kin cl'ar it up, I'll hold yer both safe till after I git this Ormsby matter finished an' then turn yer up. Jess wouldn't be ready ter travel afore that anyhow. Gimme yer hand."

"And if I don't?"

"You kin guess 'thout my telln' ov yer." "I am not bargaining for myself, but I am for Jess and the lady in whose company you found me. I suppose she is safe enough anyhow, but I want your word for it. Then I'll be ready to spin you the story, such as it is, and see if you don't say it's worth the money."

For answer Royal George held out his hand, which was taken by the other in a formal grip. Then the two sat down together, and Hen Hurley began his strange story of a crime, and what he knew of its actors and its causes.

CHAPTER XXV.

HEN HURLEY TELLS HIS STORY.

"I DON'T know whether you ever met Tom Barton or not, and as he's dead it don't make much difference."

Hen Hurley looked full into the face of the outlaw as he thus began, and paused as if to give time for agreement or disagreement.

He might as well have been looking at a wooden man.

"Barton was an old friend of mine, before he went West, and when he came back all broke up he hunted me up just as naturally as though it hadn't been five years since he sailed out of New York city."

"He had seen some rough times and been in with a queer crowd, though he did not tell me that until afterward."

"I saw that he was near the jumping-off place, and did what I could for the poor fellow. He had been mixed up in some harder things than I ever took a hand in; but for all that I couldn't go back on him."

"They didn't seem to worry him much as a general thing, but it wasn't long till I dropped to it that there was one affair that he wasn't easy about in his mind, though it was a long time before he would fairly mention it."

"One night I was sitting by his bedside and he spoke up:

"'Hank,' he said, 'if you ever have a chance at Archie Divine go for him for all you're worth.'

"'Who's Archie Divine? How shall I know him, and what has he been doing?' I asked."

"'I forgot,' he answered. 'You won't be making a fool of yourself wandering out West; and if you did you would hardly pal in with such cattle. I did; and this is what it brought me to.'

"He held up his thin, white hands as he spoke, and gave a dismal, churchyard cough."

"After a little, he went on, as though he had been telling me the full rights of the story, and had only stopped to catch his breath."

"'Well, the gang had made up their mind that the old man knew what he was going for, and that they were going to head him off. He was a stranger in camp, and it wasn't likely there would be much fuss over it if one man was missing. The camp could really have spared a dozen, and before we got through with them it did."

"'Of course we looked around to see if there was no other way; and there wasn't. One or two of the men were sent him but he wouldn't sell worth a cent; and we couldn't even get him to admit that he was just coining money out of the mine."

"'There was a gambler there that went by the name of Gentle Joe, who had been hanging around camp for some time, and the point was to fix it so as to give him a chance for the blame, if there was any going, after we got through with the stock operation.'

"'Then Lipscombe did have something to do with it?'"

"'Not a bit of it, for he left camp a week before the racket came off, and as he was in no end of a mess where he went to, it wouldn't have been hard to have proved an *alibi*, if such a thing had been needed."

"'The next thing to try, when he skipped the camp, was the wandering stranger dodge. A couple of bums had come to town that day and then gone on. Somehow they must have changed their minds about camping out up the divide, for they were seen along the edge of the camp about sundown, and they were never seen again, though I reckon they were hunted for as industriously as the population knew how. That night the thing was done."

"'When he got that far he stopped with a shiver. I didn't care about knowing such secrets, and I didn't say a word, rather hoping that he wouldn't go on. But he did. When a man starts to tell such stories, there's nothing short of a stroke of lightning will stop him."

"'It don't matter what became of those two tramps: I didn't know and didn't ask. I saw enough of the old man Stanley affair. He had a little girl, you see, and that was the hardest part of the thing to manage, for nobody wanted to meddle with her. It brings bad luck to have anything to do with

a youngster of that kind. I was glad to hear that I wasn't to have anything to do with that part of it.

"The old man's shanty was about a half a mile from camp, and it was almost a regular thing for the girl to run in on some errand. That night she was on her way back, a little later than usual, somewhere along a bit after sundown. Luck was in their favor. They gobbled her up, and from that time to this there was nothing heard of her.

"Stanley didn't worry at first, but as it got darker he suspected something, for he locked the door and started out.

"He hadn't gone a rod before he met two of the boys. They were puffing as though they had had a hard run, and called him by name when they got within a few rods of him. They told him that something had happened to the girl, and that he should go with them at once. They had found her at the bottom of Poor Man's Gulch, with a lot of bones broken and barely conscious.

"He didn't doubt them for a moment though he did not half-understand their story. All three started off on a run for Poor Man's Gulch.

"It was getting darker and darker. Just as he made out a couple of figures at some little distance, bending over some object on the ground, he tripped on a rope that was stretched in his way. Down he went, and before he had half an idea what had happened to him the two were on top. I was one of those men, and that's about all I know. What I can guess is what breaks me all up."

"He kept quiet again, for a little while, and then let out some more links:

"Yes, the boss was a cruel devil. He wouldn't even ease up the old man's mind. He told him fair and square that he knew what he had struck in that hole in the ground, and meant to have it. That he needn't worry about the girl, because she would never come back to trouble any of them. She had been dropped in a hole and he was to follow; and his brother would come on, administer on the estate, and sell out the whole thing to him. "I've got no brother," he said. "All the kith and kin I have in the world is Bess, and if you've hurt her I'll—" "Do nothing. Good-by, old man; you're only in the way here."

"I'll swear I didn't know till that minute how far the thing was going. I was on the watch, fifty yards or so away, but I heard a scrunch, a groan, and then the men carrying him away. They chucked him into the old shaft where there was a hundred foot of water if there was an inch, and his bones are there yet, as far as I know."

"An' the camp never looked fur 'em?" inquired Royal George, who had been listening with breathless eagerness.

"That was where the luck came in, as near as I could make out. Somebody or other was killed that they took to be Stanley; and when his brother turned up and sold out, for the benefit of the girl if she should ever turn up, and everything looked square and regular, why nobody made any bones about it. They didn't think it was much of a mine, anyway."

"But it war," said Royal George, between his clinched teeth. "It war ther strike ov ther season. A million at ther least they took out ov it afore they war skeered away; but it never done 'em no good, ez yer ole pard could 'a' swore to. What war ther matter with him?"

"Archie Divine was the matter with him. I suspect they didn't trust him—he had rather a weak stomach for that kind of business. He swore they poisoned him to get him out of the way. Why they chose poison instead of steel is more than I can or could make out, and I sometimes think he was only a little gone in the upper story. If he was in with such a gang, and they thought he was likely to peach, they would hardly have given him the chance, smart as he thought himself, to sneak off."

"An' he tho't ther girl was dead?"

"He was sure of it, but after what I've seen and heard here, I'm not. It looks very much as though the first letter of her name was Bess Stanley—ch?"

"An' thet Sing'lar Sam war ther gerloot that played uncle. Yer hev'n't told me so much 'bout ther story ez I didn't know, 'ceptin' ter explain whar Gentle Joe kim in at—er didn't kim in—an' wharfore, but that's

a heap ter Joseph. I dun'no fer sure, but it 'pears ter me ther thing's 'bout ripe, 'an ther time hev' come ter move on ther enemy's works."

"If you can find them—yes. But I'd like to know what all that has to do with the Ormsby matter, and just what interest you have in Elena? Seems to me you're trying to ride two horses at once. If you don't look out you may get a nasty fall between them."

For the first time the face of Royal George lost its look of stern decision. He rubbed his arm over his forehead in a hesitating sort of way.

"Elena? Oh, I don't jist recomember. Ye'r sure they hadn't it planned fur Gentle Joe ter worry ther ole man inter a hitch with ther paste-boards. Ha, ha! Ef it war, I've seen what ther chances would hev been; I done my level best an' wa'n't nowhar. Sorry for you though. He's a bu'ster—an' somehow this Joe don't look like ther other Joe, an' mebbe I've paid a big price fur a whistle thet won't blow. Thank'ee all the same. It was a good story, an' you'll find me squar'."

CHAPTER XXVI.

BESS STANLEY FINDS A FRIEND(?).

THE feminines, left to their own devices, and feeling that they were naturally foes, were without a doubt interested in Hen Hurley's departure and anxious for his return. They scowled at each other, and they cast uneasy glances at the door through which he had disappeared. If he came he might bring some intelligence from the world beyond the barriers; if he did not, they could anticipate that their own fate would be worse than they had bargained for.

He did not come. The three women were prisoners, and they all hated each other cordially. In addition, each had doubts about the other. It was possible to any one that her companions might be partners rather than victims, and if so it would be the height of folly to think of any concerted effort to escape.

The younger Mrs. Ormsby might perhaps, have set them all straight if she had been inclined to talk; but she was thinking of many things outside, and very little of the present ones; and was the most suspicious of the party.

The elder Mrs. Ormsby was the most sullen; while Bess Stanley, in spite of the more desperate nature of her mission, appeared to be in the best spirits. She had made up her mind after this fashion:

"Either these women have been taken for some such reason as that which caused my abduction, or they are traitors, in the employ of Royal George. Either way I want nothing to do with them. They would do me a harm if they could; and it would be folly to believe that we could hatch up a plan by which we could all make our escape together. The best plan is, each one for herself, and the less said to the rest the better."

Women though they were they managed to preserve silence, contenting themselves with black looks and an occasional yawn. Finally, as Hurley did not return, and there were no signs of dinner, Bess threw herself down in the position she had occupied the previous night, and closed her eyes.

She had scarcely done so when the light went out, and the place was again involved in darkness.

"Rather early for sunset," was her thought. "The light comes and goes for a purpose; after its appearance or disappearance something always happens. Look sharp this time, and see if it can't be turned to advantage."

Having thought in some such way she was the more ready for what followed.

By chance the night before she had taken her position just below the opening through which Gentle Joe had made his entrance. The spot above had been looked at more than once during the hours that since elapsed, but there was no sign that the ponderous stone could be moved by any such strength as that of the three women, even if they could devise any plan by which the roof could be reached. Probably there was some method of opening the stone-trap from the other side; but open or shut it would make

no difference to them, unless there was a means of ascent provided.

There was now a slight noise in the darkness, too indefinite to give much token, but Bess Stanley, her thoughts already in that direction, sent her gaze upward.

Something was about to happen. She recognized the touch of a rope upon her breast, and waited with bated breath to see or rather to learn what was to follow.

The rope was swung to and fro, touching her lightly in what somehow seemed to be an encouraging way. There was some one above who did not care to come down, or to make his presence known in a general way. Perhaps it was some one trying to open communication with her. She took hold of the rope, and gave a couple of gentle twitches.

They were answered in kind, and then the rope was raised up and down a couple of times, just enough to suggest that it was intended for escape.

She did not hesitate.

"Whoever it is he means it for me alone. I cannot trust the others, and I will save myself and see what then can be done. I cannot be worse off, and it may be that this is the only chance that I will have. If I mistake not, Royal George intends to end my trail for good when he has his plans all laid. If I do get safely away he will find his great mistake. Beyond a doubt he knows all, and fears the vengeance that has been so long delayed."

She caught the rope in a firmer grasp, and slowly raising herself began, in silence, to climb, hand over hand, with a skill and a strength that the outlaw would hardly have given her credit for. She was no mean athlete, and the knots she found from time to time gave her great assistance. No doubt it was by this same cord that Gentle Joe had made his descent.

The exertion was short but sharp. As breath and muscles seemed about to fail her she felt a grasp on her shoulder, and the next instant the strain upon her wrists was relieved, and she was swung up to a solid footing. Still in darkness, she could only guess that she was in a corridor, or narrow passage, from which there was some outlet on a different level from that by which she had entered.

"Do not move," a voice whispered in her ear, as the grasp on her shoulder was withdrawn. Then she knew by instinct, rather than by her senses, that the opening through which she had passed was being once more closed.

It seemed hardly possible, yet she must have been withdrawn from her companions without their being made aware of her departure. The *sang-froid* with which the three had received every change from light to darkness, had been in her favor. The others had made it a point to pay no attention to their surroundings, and so she had slipped away from them.

"Trust in me," said the voice, and it seemed marvelously like that of Gentle Joe.

"They might have known that I was fly to the secrets of all these old shafts—and to a few more than they knew anything about. Let them guard the outside till they are tired of the fun; there's more than one way out of the woods. I meant to save you in spite of them all."

"But the rest. Are they not in danger, too?"

Bess spoke in the same careful whisper, and for the moment felt a guilty shame at deserting those who had been her companions in misfortune.

"Don't fret your pretty soul about them. They all belong to the same gang, and they intended to have you for a victim. If you live some of them must die, and they know it, and that you are at last hot on the trail. I overshot the mark when I tried once before to rescue you—and you helped to make a mess of it, but I hope this time we will understand each other better. If not, I think you will at least take safety at my hands and leave it to the future to come to a true understanding. Now, be silent. There are a few moments of danger, and after that comes safety."

While the man spoke he was drawing her away, by a path that seemed perfectly familiar to his feet; and full of a strange doubt, she was silent, and suffered herself to be led along.

How far they went, and how long they were going, was a something that she tried to keep track of, but with rather poor results. She only knew, from the twisting and turning, and the care with which he at times proceeded, that the way was a tortuous one, and that probably the man expected to leave to those who might attempt to follow, no signs to show in what direction, and by whose assistance their captive had disappeared.

At length he gave what seemed to be a sigh of relief, and halted.

"I think I can say now that you are in safety at last. The outlaws can scarcely find us here, unless they know more about the secrets of these old shafts than I think they do."

"Where are we, then; and who are you?"

"We are in an old mine, that may have been worked before the flood for all I know. It makes no difference who I am—you have recognized me, I think, sufficiently for all practical purposes. It is enough that I am your friend to the death, if needs be; and that you never were in as much danger as that from which I just rescued you."

"And why was I in danger? For what reason did that man interfere? I knew nothing of him before, and of course would not have been likely to ever get in his way."

"Sooner or later the trails you have been trying to follow would have led to him, and then would have come the settlement of hate. Of all the men you have sought he most of all deserved the quest—and was the most dangerous of all to find. It was a safe bet that he would have throttled you the moment he was assured there was nothing more to be learned from you. You were taken to slay."

"I can hardly believe it. There was something more than chance in his having us three women meet together, though I cannot imagine what connection they have with me."

"Yet they have a connection—one that I will understand before the night is over. Ah, you know me now? Perhaps you do not hate me quite as heartily as you did."

As they talked her rescuer struck a light; and Brilliant Bess gave a start, and a low cry—even though she had been in some measure prepared for the face that she saw. It was the face of Gentle Joe.

"Hate you—yes, worse than before. There is no honor or honesty in you. Ah, I have been fooled—duped. I am no more free than I was. I am your prisoner instead of Royal George; and the change is for the worse."

She drew herself up as she spoke, and her eyes glittered with a mad fire. She even raised her weaponless hand. If she had had the power, without a doubt she would have laid him dead at her feet.

Yet the man seemed neither dismayed nor discouraged, but answered her in the soft, purring tones for which Gentle Joe received his name:

"You have all along chosen to think I am your enemy. It is a mistake. I am your friend—I am more than your friend. You would take my life this minute, if you could; while I would die to serve you. You have treated me unfair from the outset, yet I have suffered and hoped. Bess Stanley, can you not see that I love you?"

She had been looking in his face now as she had never looked before.

"Is this a foul jest, or are you mad? Love! Why, you villain! do you think I do not remember you? Every hour since that black time one face has been with me—the face of the man who, when I was a child, lured me away from duty and father, and made me a sharer in the awful murders of that night. That face was yours, Gentle Joe! Some last, lingering shade of uncertainty has held my hand thus far, but now I doubt no longer."

"Hal hal pretty one; in all this world there never was a girl so mistaken and bewildered as you. I am not Gentle Joe, and neither he nor I had any hand in your father's death. If there is any sacred oath that you would believe, name it, and you shall hear me swear."

"Bah! An oath from you—gambler, thief, assassin! Your hands red with the father's blood, you dare address such words to the

daughter! Enough. Attempt your worst, and see how Bess Stanley will meet you!"

"My worst is, perhaps, not as bad as you may think. For the present, I will only keep my birdie safe. Some day in the future she may change her mind, and laugh at the idle fancies that now clog her brain. You are mine—always will be mine—certain as fate!"

He sprung toward her as he spoke, his arms outstretched, his face on fire.

Though she knew not which way to turn, flight was her only hope. She slipped away from his fingers and dashed by, while right in his path, as he followed after, a dark shadow loomed, a revolver rose until its cold muzzle touched his forehead, while a voice said:

"Halt right there! Another step and you drop!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK.

"WHAT'S the matter with him?" asked Hen Hurley of his brother, as Royal George, with a face that wore a strangely puzzled look, took his departure and left the two alone together.

"Crazy as a bedbug—and you're just in the same boat to be telling him a lot of stuff like that you got over."

"Nothing like the frozen truth at all times. If I expected to settle in this delectable climate I might keep such secrets as a matter of speculation; but as I want to get out as fast as I can, and take Elena with me, I didn't see that it had any chance to rise higher in value than the present market price."

"Not considerin' that if any of Barton's old pards find out how you have sold them out they will be going for four necktie; and Royal George will always suspect that you knew more about the thing than you were willing to tell."

"I told a good, square story, and if he don't believe it, I can't help it. Don't let's quarrel about it, though. Here I've been with you half an hour and haven't found out how bad you were hurt, and who did the job, and for what."

"When you begin to ask questions you want the earth. I don't know what the thing means any more than you do, and I'm not sure who put it up; but I do know I'm not half as bad hurt as I thought I was, and that I'll give them a fair shake about getting away if matters don't grow worse. Blast it! I wish I did know the inside truth. I'd know where the lightning would strike when I get out and on the war-path. Let that go, though. You've done me a heap of good anyhow, and if I keep on improving my friends at Blazer's won't know me."

There was something in what Jess said, for almost without an effort he was dropping much of the uncouthness from his speech, showing that it was more a mask than a second nature.

"And how soon do you expect to get out and go on the war-path? I would offer my help if I hadn't my hands full already with a contract that may give me trouble enough. There's a woman in the case—a woman that I got into this mix, and that I have sworn to see out. If you can give me a pointer you will earn my everlasting gratitude. When I came to see you I left her behind, and I want to know how to get back to her and how to get away with her. Can you give me a hint?"

"More hints than you can count, but I won't swear that any of them are worth anything; and if you'll wait till I get the strength I'll go along. If there's a woman in the case—as of course there must be—everything else must wait. I don't suppose I need worry about Gentle Joe's running away meantime. He's not exactly the running kind."

"If I don't have to wait too long I would sooner have your help than not, and I don't feel like leaving you here if I can do you any good. At the same time I can't afford to lose more time than I must. Perhaps if you are in no danger now it would be just as well if your affairs and mine were not mixed any more than may be necessary."

"Don't fret yourself about Jess Hurley. He generally comes out near the top of the heap. I am under the weather, but I've lots of good in me for all that, and if your affairs won't wait I'm ready for business now. The only thing is that it's rather early in the

day to begin. I'd sooner have a little more light here and a little less outside. Keep your ears open for any of these galoots that may be sneaking around, and I'll see how the land lays. I know a heap about these quarters, that Royal George don't begin to suspect. I wish I knew more just now, but it's just likely I know enough."

He held up his hand to enforce his warning, and then raised himself up with a strength that his brother had not credited him with possessing.

"A shame to go back on their good nature, after they were kind enough to leave us a light, but if they wanted us to stay they ought to have said so. Couldn't have thought we were going to throw a chance over our shoulders. And George is a half-crank, as I said before, and don't always reckon on what a man may know. There's a little wrinkle here, if things are as they used to was, that ought to let us out if the light lasts long enough. Here you are; come and see."

Hen Hurley watched his brother with as much surprise as curiosity. He wondered how Jess came to know the secrets of the outlaw's retreat, and half suspected for the moment that he might be a confederate rather than a victim.

However that was, Jess had certainly found what he had hinted existed.

"There's yer secret passage and yer way out. If we can follow it without tumbling overboard I'll bet high that we strike daylight by a road that Royal George never heard of. If you feel yourself going just clasp your hands and say your prayers—there's not much use in trying anything else."

He caught up the light and held it down while his brother preceded him through the aperture. Then he followed closely, and after carefully closing the trap behind him, took the lead.

"It's been some time since I went through here, but I guess I haven't quite forgot the lay of the land. Keep right at my heels, for something may happen to the light, and I don't want to lose you here; there might be some trouble in finding the corpse."

"How do you come to know anything about it at all? Seems to me you have a heap of knowledge about the inside workings of the road-agencies. Maybe you have been on the racket yourself."

"Don't be inquisitive. You knew a heap about things yourself. Perhaps I have some dead pards, too, that told me all about it."

The hit was enough to silence the other, and he followed in quiet, picking his way as much by imitating the movements of his brother as by the aid of the feeble light, whose glimmer scarcely reached beyond the spot on which he at the time was planting his feet.

"Hush!" said Jess, suddenly. "Stand close, and keep your hand on my shoulder. Some one is coming, and it will be safer to put out the light."

It was only a faint sound, but that it was a footfall was certain; and without hesitation the light was extinguished, and the two crouched in the darkness.

"I reckon they will go on by, but if they don't, and turn in here, it's going to make a deuced unpleasant mix, unless they let us take them unawares. Fur goodness sake, lay low! When a man has no shooters, and durned little strength, he don't want to get into a rough and tumble with the next man that comes along."

The two hugged the wall of the low and narrow passage, and waited in breathless eagerness as the footsteps came nearer and nearer.

At length a faint light, at some little distance ahead, showed that the critical time was at hand.

The light, however, remained stationary, and the voices came more plainly to their ears. Sometimes they lost a word or two, for the speakers were guarded, in spite of the seeming seclusion; but, for the most part, it was not hard to make out their meaning.

"You know something about the inside now that no one of the gang but myself ever knew before, and I don't say I would have told it to you if I hadn't wanted to use you. It's a secret that died with the old man—if he knew anything about it. When he lit on to the mine, it's just as likely that he only took hold of what he saw, and didn't trouble

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GENTLE JOSEPH HAS A SHOW.

AT the unexpected appearance, and the stern order, the man stopped as abruptly as though the bullet had already bored his brain.

"No shenanigan, my Gentle Joe, I know what you can do with the tools and I'm taking no chances. You ought to know what Jess Hurley can do with them too, and when he pulls trigger the bullet *always* goes home. I've a little bill made out, here, and you'll settle it before you go a step further."

"Don't be a fool, Jess Hurley. A shot, and you bring a gang here that even you can't get away with. Better talk it over, and see if you haven't swallowed a mistake and left one end sticking out."

"All the gangs in the world can't scare me when I'm going to get even. They may pull me in out of the wet, but it will be a shade too late to help you any. And then they would have to run their chances with two men that are mighty hard to get away with. You sabbe? I'm going to go for you, but I'll give you a show if you'll let me. If you don't, then I'll drop you just where you may be standing."

"Much good may it do you then, but fire away. We may as well have it over now as any other time. I've seen so many dead sars things slip up that I'm ready to stand my chances even on this. Only I'd like to know, first, how you come to be here."

"I knew you were a coward if a man could only get you in a corner. No one but a coward would have taken a drop-shot from behind on the man that was risking his life, and had done it more than once, on his account. Any other man could have had his shot and welcome if he thought I was in his way; but you, a side pard, that even the Baby didn't know of—that's rubbin' it in a little too thick. Good-by."

He held his hand still. Great as was his hate, he could hardly accomplish a cold-blooded assassination—yet he did not want to give away the advantage that he held. If he wanted to slay in cold blood he should have done it at the outset. The work looked harder at each moment's delay.

"You can't quite do it! Well, there's an honest streak in you, sure. If you want to make a fight of it you will find me ready. I only pull back when you talk about dragging me over all creation. I don't ask too much, either. Keep your shooting-iron out, if you choose, but let me lay my hand on mine. Then count three, and we'll fire together. I'll risk it that I can pull and fire while you are crooking your finger on the trigger. One of us will drop, sure enough, but it won't seem so much like red murder."

It looked like a sure enough thing in his favor, but Jess Hurley knew that when he agreed to anything that Gentle Joe proposed, he was taking the risk. He was too thorough a gambler himself not to know that when a professional proposed a stake, he had some way by which he hoped to win. For all that, he was willing to take the chances. Very few men lived that could get away with him in the game of draw and shoot, and though Gentle Joe had a reputation that was counted as gilt-edge, his own had never suffered by comparison.

"I'll take the offer; but don't you try any foul play. I know when a man means to shoot as far as I can see him, and if I see it in your eyes I'll never wait. Ready?"

"Ready it is."

"One! Two! Three!"

In one hand the torch still burned, while in the other the revolver was leaping up, and Jess Hurley's finger was really crooking.

There was a stunning report as the two revolvers were discharged together; then, as the sounds of the echoes died away, there was a harsh laugh. Neither man was hurt.

No fault of theirs was it though. As the word "three" was dropping from Hurley's mouth two hands shot out, settling on either wrist, and turning the muzzles upward with an irresistible force. The hammers fell the bullets hurtled, there was the stunning crash, but for all the deadly harm that was worked they might as well have saved the charges.

"Ha, ha, my daisies! What yer doin' in Royal George's campin' ground? Didn't yer know yer war in danger ern'uf 'bout shootin' off yer guns ter bring down ther

neighbors? Ef I'd 'a-bin' you I'd 'a-lit out while I hed ther chance. Whar's ther rest ov ther caryvan? Looks ez though you'd let some ov 'em git away, Jess. It's dangerous ter hev a stranger wanderin' round in ther dark, an' ef thet brother ov yours ain't a stiff afore he goes three rod he knows more 'bout this hyar region than ther man thet invented it."

As a blaze of light was thrown upon the scene while he spoke, and half a dozen men stood with pistols poised, the two men scarcely made a struggle to withdraw their wrists from the grip that tightened on them.

Jess looked around in some bewilderment. He had paid little attention to Bess Stanley, and supposed that his brother was right behind him. The words of Royal George showed him how he had been mistaken. Doubtless Harry had followed off in the wake of the woman, and who could tell in what danger he might be now?

"You see it, dont you? Better trust to ther ole man than go scoutin' 'round in ther dark, in sich a infernal death-trap ez this. Wal, soothe yerself. He ain't in no great danger, 'less he gits a sickness ov ther heart; then I can't help 'im. Ez fur you, ther best thing I know ov is fur you ter glide back ter ther hospital yer jest sloped frum, an' wait till ye'r better able ter travel. This hyar gentleman I hev my own uses fur, ov which thar are no use ter say funder. Is ther man with ther rope round?"

"He are hyar."

"That's ernuf. Lead 'em away."

The man with the rope came forward, and Royal George loosened his hold on the wrists, that, up to this time, he had been holding.

As his hands dropped away his plans dropped with them.

"Not this eve—some other eve, my friend. How is this for high?"

The two men had dropped their revolvers under the twist on their wrists, and practically, under the half dozen muzzles pointing toward them, they seemed disarmed.

Jess Hurley had accepted the situation—his treatment so far justified him in putting some little reliance in what was said to him. The other had no promise but the rope—and for that he was not ready. Another revolver appeared in his hand as if by magic, and as he spoke he punctuated his sentences with three shots, and then turned and ran. Probably he knew the ins and outs of the place as well as Royal George and he was certainly very handy with his weapons. The first shot brought down the leader of the outlaws, and to each of the others a man fell. The wonder was that he did not stay and try to slay them all.

Perhaps he would have done so if he had not thought of the woman in the darkness.

If he looked for her he missed her; a voice called out from the darkness into which he had plunged:

"This way! Show a light; I have a woman on my arm and I daren't move for fear of your infernal pitfalls. Your man has gone by; and if you don't move lively he'll get clear away."

Jess Hurley recognized the voice of his brother, and catching up a torch moved away a few paces.

"That's enough! Stand there a moment and I'll be with you. I see my way. Are you safe, Jess?"

"Safe enough; but there has been some bad work here and I ought to be hung for letting him get away," was the answer, just as Harry staggered up, with Bess Stanley in his arms. And just then, from the darkness he had left there sounded the crack of a revolver, and again the rush of distant feet.

"Ah, I'll bet my soul he went fer Singular Sam. Wonder if that was a mistake."

"Scarcely," gritted a hoarse voice at his elbow. "Singular Sam knows too much. The game is up here, we'll move next on Blazer's Bar. I'll put the noose 'round his neck ef I die a-doin' it."

It was Royal George who spoke, and it seemed that the wound he had received was but trifling, after all.

One of the others who had dropped to the shots was also only slightly hurt; but the third was not so fortunate. It was Ned the Nailer, and he had gone down to stay.

"Lucky fur you," said Royal George, as he looked up from the corpse to Hen Hurley.

himself about the balance. The thing is full of wrinkles, and this one I've been saving up for my own use. There may be some more that even I do not know. Stay here now, and keep your eyes open. I could bring in the gang and clean things up, of course, but I prefer that you and I should do the work. Wait quietly; I will be careful, if it takes an hour. When I come, let me find you just where I left you. If I am discovered I can take care of myself, and there is no way in which you could help me."

"All right; I'll stick ter orders ef it 'a-ists owners. When you git back, you'll find me hyar, er a reason why."

"I'd sooner find you than the reason. Remember."

Then the light went on and disappeared. Evidently the man was waiting right at the mouth of the narrow drift, which, as Jess Hurley knew, opened into a small chamber. If the brothers wanted to go further, it would be necessary to remove him from their way; a thing not so easy to do, since it would be hard to find him in the darkness, and if he had warning of their presence, he might find them most effectually.

"We must git him," muttered Jess in the faintest of whispers. "Keep right by me, an' when yer feel me goin' fur him, you come along. It's Singular Sam, an' he's no slouch to tackle; but both together, and him off of his guard, we ought to do the job. I'll have his tools if it takes a life; but I don't just care to kill him."

"Why not act on the square, and get his help? It seems pretty certain they are going for the road-agent."

"Square, thunder! You make me sick! That gang is worse than the other. I'd sooner trust to George twice over. Come, We're going for him, and we'll make the rifle or have the holiest kind of a pic-nic."

Together they crawled forward, carefully noting the progress they made so as to give some fair sort of guess when the time for action had come.

Silently as they went, the man somehow suspected the presence of an intruder. They heard him move, and in imagination could see him bending forward to catch the direction from whence the sound proceeded.

That was enough.

Jess Hurley rose from his crouching position and hurled himself forward like a tiger, his brother following.

Chance was in their favor, and they were both good men, though single-handed, and with anything like a fair show, Singular Sam could have handled either. He went down under the savage assault before he had a chance to use a weapon or strike a blow.

"Ah! I have you," gritted Jess, as he knelt upon the prostrate man. "I can hit hard when I do let go, and I think you got it for all I'm worth. Strike a match, Hank, and I'll fix him so that he won't give us any more trouble. I didn't think Singular Sam could be taken in quite so easily; but the job is done, and it wasn't half amusement."

While he spoke the two were acting, and in another moment or two Sam was bound and gagged sufficiently well to render him comparatively helpless.

"Struck a bonanza, haven't we?" said Henry, as he took possession of the arsenal of weapons with which the belt of the prisoner was garnished. "We'll make a fair divy on these, and be ready for the next party that comes along. Better shove him back out of sight and keep an eye out for the other. He may be getting back soon."

"You bet we'll keep an eye out for him; and when he and I meet we'll have a settlement of affairs that won't leave me much behind on the account. Curse him, I owe him one, and I'll pay it in full. Keep cool. We won't have long to wait."

It might have been more prudent to make their escape now, while the way was open; but they did not think of that. In silence they waited; and though it was not really so long it seemed like an age.

Then they heard the footsteps of the man returning, and other lighter footsteps, while there was the glimmer of an approaching light, that for a time came steadily forward, but finally stopped.

After that was the scene given in the last chapter, Bess Stanley broke away; the man pursued; and in his path suddenly rose Jess Hurley.

"He war a useful man but he'd his leetle failin's. Ef he c'u'd 'a' got his fingers on you, salt wouldn't hev saved you. Look after ther girl a minnit while we see after Sam. There's big money in him, ef he'll split."

"And Gentle Joe—"

"Gentle nothin'. He can't fool one side ov me. I begin ter see it all now."

As they talked they walked, and a little distance away they came upon a man groaning.

"Curses on him; it was *he* that set up the job on me last night, and when he failed came back on me again. He saw me, he knew me, and he held as straight as he knew how. Listen, and I'll tell the whole truth."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BIG OFFER.

GENTLE JOE followed the dark-eyed man without hesitation, and gave no sign that the call was either unwelcome or unexpected. The man did not belong to Blazer's Bar, and though he was evidently acquainted with the events that had transpired at the Jungle, it did not seem likely that his intentions had any connection with them. It was more than possible that he was an emissary from Royal George.

Any other man would have at least exhibited some signs of caution; Lipscombe did not, though his hands hung somewhat conveniently to the pockets of his sack coat.

Twenty yards from the Jungle the man stopped and wheeled about.

"When I get through maybe you'll think I'm a friend, and maybe you won't. I'm not going to surprise you very much, and I'll say what I've got to say in short order, and then give you a few moments to think over it."

"Propel, my venerated friend. You've insisted on my taking a hand in your game, and I mean to make it pay or know the reason why. Who are you talking for, and what is it?"

"Time enough for the first when we see how we hold together. For the second, this: You are a New Yorker, and your true name is Caton Ormsby. You are the real heir to a fortune that is not less than a million. In addition, you are wanted on the other side of the mountains to answer for the supposed murder of one Major Kavanaugh. If you lose your life to get the fortune, I can't say but what you miss both. Do you want to come to terms by which you can have and save both?"

"A good deal of Greek in that chinning; ain't there, old man? If there is any risk about it don't say another word. I'd sooner be Gentle Joe, without a cent in my pocket but a boss in Blazer's Bar, than the owner of four or five millions and in the Tombs. Let it go to Mrs. Ormsby. I don't want it."

"We've thought of that game, my friend; but if we play it where will you be when the curtain comes down?"

"Me? I'll be supposed to be dead. Isn't that satisfactory?"

"It would be in some respects, but we need you, and to get your help are willing to treat you squarely. Suppose, for instance, we could prove that you didn't kill Kavanaugh at all, that he is still living; how would that suit you? You'd like to go back and revel in the old ancestral halls, eh?"

"It would be a regular lark, that's a fact," admitted Gentle Joe.

"And you wouldn't want to be bothered with a Mrs. Ormsby either, would you?"

"Not any in mine."

"And if you could be assured that you wouldn't be, and that all the rest could be managed, would you be willing to say, halves?"

"Why, you're the most generous rascal I ever heard of. Such benefactors are scarce, I tell you. But it looks to me as if such confidence in human nature don't belong to this world. Suppose, when I got hold of the Ormsby estates, I refused to ante up, what you going to do about that?"

"We're not going to suppose any such thing. Before we move a step we're going to take your word to do the fair thing. You are a tough citizen, Joseph, but I know enough about you to be sure that when you give your word to a pard you won't go back on it. Give me your hand and we'll trust you."

"And if I should shake hands with you; what is the first thing you would want me to do?"

"Get out of here before to-morrow morning."

"Thanks. I wouldn't object if it wasn't for one thing."

"And that?"

"There's another party in the bush that insists upon my staying. And, in fact, I couldn't well go back on them. If I did they would be mighty apt to do a little killing on their own account. So you see, take it all around, I don't think we can trade."

"Will you talk to a man that thinks maybe there's been a big mistake somewhere, and if he is once certain that there has, can set you right?"

"Talk? You bet! I'm just ready to howl to anybody that can straighten up this infernal mix. But you and I can't trade on any such basis as that you've just been talking about. I don't care a continental for the Ormsby fortune, and I do, a great deal, for something else. It's hardly worth while for you to come back."

"I'm not so sure of that. I'll talk to the other party and see what he has to say. We'll give you a chance, and if we find you can't take it, that settles it—and something more. Will you run the risks?"

"Anything to get at the bed rock of knowledge. Bring on your party, and I'll be ready to talk—or shoot."

"You may have a chance to do both. Keep shady for a few minutes; I think there are wolves abroad."

Rather to Lipscombe's surprise, the stranger turned away without further effort to come to terms, and he watched him vanish in the darkness with a puzzled air.

While he stood there in a thoughtful mood, a hand was laid upon his arm, and turning, he distinguished the outlines of a familiar figure—that of Ragged Rufe.

The vagabond had been out of sight at the time, and was evidently ignorant of the little affair at the Jungle—at least, he did not refer to it; but he had evidently been listening to the conversation with the stranger.

"Took sand ter throw a chance like thet overboard. Why don't somebuddy talk like thet ter me, eh? Betcher sweet life I ain't a-sayin' no. Sha'n't I call him back? It ain't too late, an' I'll go yer halves on ther risk fur my sheer ov ther profits."

There were at times glimmerings of knowledge in the eyes of the vagabond that made Gentle Joe uncertain when to decide that he was guessing, when lying, and when talking at large. Sometimes he trusted him; again he wished he was miles away; but all the time he felt like using him for what he might turn out to be worth.

"Rufus, you are entirely too inquisitive for your own good. Some day you will be so fresh that they will take you in and salt you down to keep. I'm not asking any questions of you, am I? I'll tell you more. If I didn't think that somehow you might be more than you seem, I'd do the little job myself."

"Good ernuf, pard. I don't take no offense; but ef yer would expound why yer go back on sich a chance, mebbe I'd know what ter do ef I ever git in, sich a box meself."

Gentle Joe looked at him coldly.

"It can't hurt anybody to know, and I don't mind telling you, whether you are square or cross. Blood in self-defense don't worry me as much as it did a few years ago when I was young and innocent; but the blood of a woman is more than I care to shed for all the money that Ilugh Ormsby ever counted. And if I wrung into this game with the aforesaid stranger—and I can guess pretty well who he comes from—there would be two dead women, if not three before the the frolic ended."

"An' yer think it's him an' his crowd ez hes ther daisies in ther box?"

"I don't think so, I know it."

"An' you ain't a-helpin' them out? I didn't think it ov yer Joe; I didn't think it ov yer."

"Don't be previous. Perhaps Gentle Joe is not as quiet as he looks. Until they have the balls all set, and the game made, the women are safe. By that time maybe I'll be doing something!"

"Maybe you'd like ter be doin' suthin' now?"

"Just as much as is safe, Rufus, just as much as is safe. Do you think it would do well enough for the present if I gave Sing'ler Sam a hint of the racket? He can't help the one without taking along all three, and the way things have been running I don't suppose he would let Bess Stanley stick, whether she's anything particularly near to him or not."

"Looks are mighty deceivin', pard; an' I wouldn't bet a pickayune on bein' able ter name ther keard when Sing'ler Sam are a flippin' ov 'em. Ter *my* noshun he'd give about three cents an' a half ter ther man ez sent her up ther flume; an' if he couldn't let ther contract, an' hed a good chance, he wouldn't mind a-takin' ov it hisself."

"Heavens! Do you think so? For once in my life I may have done a foolish thing. If I have, a better man than I am might have been deceived."

"Ef you've give Sing'ler Sam any p'int yer ondoubtedly hev; fer jest ez true ez preachin' he's standin' in with ther gang ez are workin' roots. I'm a stranger, so ter speak in this hyar burg, an' you're 'bout the only man ez would tech me with a forty foot pole; but I kin see what's goin' on ez well ez ther next, an' I tell yer ther biz he's kerryin' on are jest too funny fur ary use."

"And he means harm to the girl?"

"Jest those same. Ef he did tell her what he knowd 'bout ther death ov Ili Stanley I don't guess she'd hev ter travel fur ter finish ther job what she's workin' on. Jest what he's after are what I'd give suthin' ter find out; but I'll swar it's foul play anyhow."

"Then come with me. Maybe you'll learn before the night is over."

"Hush! Thar's suthin' in ther wind now. Lay low while I find out."

And with the hasty warning Ragged Rufe darted away.

CHAPTER XXX.

OLD PARDS MEET.

It took sharp ears to hear the sound that had attracted Ragged Rufe's attention, and a keen wit to imagine anything in it that was suspicious. Lipscombe rather believed that the man of rags was simply trying to cover his own disappearance; and though lately feeling inclined to confide more or less in that worthy he was just at this moment more suspicious than ever before of the good faith of Rufus Primrose.

Nevertheless it was well to be cautious anyhow; and so, when he followed, it was as noiselessly as though his life depended on it.

When he had gone about a dozen yards, though Ragged Rufe was nowhere to be seen, faith in his integrity was pretty well re-established. Some one else was in sight.

Two men were near, and were talking in a low tone.

"Things have gone far enough and to-night there will be a big explosion. If certain parties get taken up it will be all the better for me, and money in pocket for the boys. But look sharp that the wrong man don't get laid out."

"Pick out just who yer want ter drop, an' to-morrer yer kin jingle ther bell fur ther fun'rais. Whar's Sam? Tho't he war runnin' ther inside work. Ef he'd bin 'round thar wouldn't bin so much ov a botch ov it las' night."

"Hush, not so loud. Sam has been out on the war-path, and I'm mighty much afraid he'll turn up among the missing. It's too late to look for him to-night. We must finish the work in Blazer's. To-morrow we'll have the whole town behind us and get things squared down to date. I have all the points and the gang can't get away without dropping their plunder. If they try it we'll take no prisoners. They may know too much, and I owe them a big one for chipping into my game. They hold big cards now, but wait till I bring up the cold deck, and we'll see who gathers in the sequins. Curse him, who is he—and what does he want with her?"

"After ther news Sam brung yer 'tain't hard ter guess. He's workin' ther same racket on ther stren'th ov our repertashun; an' he wants her 'cause he thinks ther's coin in it. He ain't no man's fool, from ther way he starts out, an' he'll take a shy at all thet's in ther ring. Ef thar ain't suthin' done soon

thar's goin' ter be trouble. Two gangs can't live on ther same pasture. One ov 'em are bound ter starve."

"From the way they got the bulge on you fellows last night I should say the chances were that death was going to come a little faster than by starvation. Be on your guard. They know more than I thought any other living men could know. But they will hardly come into the Bar, and there I will have work for half a dozen to-night. You'll be apt to see that cross-eyed man back before morning. I've had a couple of men looking for him all day without finding hair, hide or hoof; but he told Sam he was coming, and he's one of the kind that always keeps his word—when no one wants him to. The cursed botch that let him run loose last night may be made again, and sooner or later he'll give trouble. While the job is being done that ragged rough that trains at the heels of Gentle Joe must go along with him."

"All right, but ther don't want ter be no f'olin'. That cross-eyed gerloot are a man ov sand, anyhow, an' thar's a strong undercurrent settin' in ag'in' tacklin' him. He didn't make much show hyar; but they've lately heard from him up above. Ef it's ther same man—"

The other broke in with sudden sternness, his voice unconsciously rising a little so that the hot tones came quite distinctly to the ears of Gentle Joe.

"And it is the same man. They can disguise themselves as they choose; I know them all well enough to shoot at a venture. Ragged Rufe is of the same gang. I have made up my mind. Pass it around. Let everything else go, and clean up here."

"An' how about Gentle Joe? Are he ter be tuk in when ther horn blows?"

"Let Gentle Joe be. There's something about him—I may need him. Strange. Never mind, though. After the warning he got last night he will be apt to sing small for a little, and by that time I may be able to see my way better. But the cross-eyed man—shoot him on sight."

"You bet I will," muttered Sam, who had thoughts of his own that tallied exactly with those of the other in their drift, if they differed in motive.

"The cross-eyed man stands a mighty poor show," thought Lipscombe, listening to this conversation, the most of which came quite distinctly to his ears; "but what in the name of vengeance do they want to save me up for, and who the thunder is my friend in the big hat? I must be getting old and blind, or I'd drop to him, for I swear I know him. Ah! that conference is at an end. There's somebody coming in the distance, and they skip like jack rabbits. I'll trail 'em if it's in the wood."

He started cautiously to follow the two men, who had turned around the nearest building; but he could not help but give one glance back over his shoulder.

In that brief time he caught sight of two other men coming down the street, and Ragged Rufe slouching forward to meet them. And just then some one touched Gentle Joe on the shoulder.

The man of rags started up suddenly from the ground, where he had been crouching; and, only hesitating long enough to see that Gentle Joe was off on the trail, turned his attention to the new-comers—though it was possible that they were only a pair of Bar-ites, roaming from one saloon to another.

He sauntered toward them with the easy swagger that characterized him, and timed his progress so well that he halted almost in front of them, just as they were about to pass through the line of light that streamed out through the window of a neighboring cabin.

As they walked slowly along, more intent upon their low conversation than upon their surroundings, it was not hard to obtain a good view of their faces.

"Kin I b'leve me eyes?" exclaimed Rufus. "Jest stop right thar, gents, whar you'll hev a chance ter behold me own bloomin' countenance. Ef it ain't—yes, it *are*—an' don't yer furgit it. Mord Mort, how in ther name ov wrath dus yer do?"

Rufus extended his hand and stumbled forward.

As the party addressed halted, and then went a pace or two backward, the florid face with its watery eyes, bulbous nose, and tobacco-stained mouth, was full in the glare

of the light, and any one that had ever seen it before should have had no trouble in recognizing it.

Mordaunt Mortimer hesitated, nevertheless. His hands went into his pockets instead of into those of the bummer, and he stared steadily into the blinking eyes that were trying vainly to peer into his.

"I rather think you are mistaken, sir. At least, you have the advantage of me. I do not remember your face; and I am not weeping over the fact. Stand aside. I am a stranger in the place and have no time for any practical jokes, if that is what you want to put up on me."

"Joke! Bless my soul, Rufus Primrose ain't set up a joke on an old pard sence Hector war a pup. Yer don't mean ter say yer hev clean furgot yer old side pard, who roamed through ther shady bowers ov Wales—which ther same it war New South—with yer, an' drifted clean out ter sea ther time we skipped frum Sidney. Why, ole man, whar are yer eyes, an' yer nose? I w'u'd 'a' knowed yer a mile."

"Rufus Primrose! Ah, it seems to me I remember a man of that name, but where I met him is not so certain, except that it could not have been at the antipodes, since I never was there. Probably you have mixed me up with some reminiscences of your last escape from a penal settlement. We won't shake, but I have no objection to hearing what you have to say for yourself. It's a drink first, last, and all the time, I suppose."

"Now yer hit me about whar I gin'rally live, though ez fur ther present I ain't eg-zactly suff'rin'. Yer needn't think ther ole man jest wanted ter wring in. 'Pon me soul, when I see'd yer it jest made me think ov ole times, an' I felt good all over. What brung yer ter Blazer's? It's a mighty hard place, an' I tell yer it's jest ez well ter hev a friend ez knows all ther ropes by name. But freeze onter ther ev'nin' Primrose an' he'll take yer through all right."

"Thanks for the generous offer, but I fancy I am able to look after my own interest in most places, and if my hand don't hold out I've picked up a man pretty much of your kidney already. Between us we ought to be able to do the Bar. Still, I never refuse assistance when I need it. Perhaps you can be of a little present use. Do you happen to know where I would be most likely to stumble across a man by the name of—ah, Lipscombe is his one handle, though I understand he is more generally known here under the name of Gentle Joe? I have been looking for him, but they tell me he had some sort of a difficulty last night, and that it is more than likely he has skipped the town. Just my luck. I may travel a thousand miles and then find my man has skipped the day before."

The man who was with Mordaunt Mortimer very prudently kept in the background; though Rufus had given various inquisitive glances, he had been unable to see more than a general outline—just enough to guess on.

Now the man came forward a pace or two, and gave a pull at Mortimer's arm.

"Ain't I beat an' bummer an' hard case ernuf 'thout a-pickin' him up? Jest say ther word, pard, an' let me h'ist him. Ef yer git him in tow, they'll hang us all three."

"Why, dog-gone my tail-feathers, ef it ain't me ole side-pard, ther cross-eyed man, w'at they war huntin' fur so industr'us las' night! I'm a leetle down on me luck, an' can't blame a nabob like Mord, hyer, fur givin' me ther shake; but you—bless yer soul!—yer orter reef right in an' howl ter see me. Abednego, ye ole shark, put it right thar, er you an' me'll fight!"

Ragged Rufe executed a rapid advance, and the cross-eyed man showed no symptoms of wanting to get out of his way.

"Ef yer want ter—shake. Then you kin answer Mister Mortimer's question an' git."

The clasp of hands was not remarkably cordial, but Primrose took no offense, continuing his observations, however, to Mortimer:

"I s'pose yer know thet after you slid out ther Gentle kept on a holdin' ther aidge till it got 'round ter him ag'in, an' then started fur Jumptown. Still, thar ain't more ner half ther town knows thet he's got back ag'in, an' I'd be free ter bet thet in ther next ten

minnits he'll be 'round ter Neddy's Jungle, w'ich are jest whar I'm goin'. Ef yer want ter see him *very* bad, that's whar I'd advise yer ter go."

"From the name I should judge that it would be a likely place to find a man of his caliber. Show the way; but I want to leave you at the door. I have no desire to enter the society of the Bar under your sponsorship. Here's money—more than the job is worth; lead on!"

"I'm yer antelope; but I'd advise yer ter stroke Joseph gently when yer find him. He's in an orful bad humor—ready ter lay out two corpses ag'in' breakfast. There'll be fun yit afore ther night's over—speshully ef Mart Hammers gits his paws on Trinn-fador. Thar's jest dozens a-waitin' fur him."

"Let 'em wait," growled the cross-eyed man. "When ther band strikes up ther openin' overture, they'll find thet Abednego are around."

"Jest ez yer please; but I would remark, thar's ther fu'st notes ov ther band now."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CROSS-EYED MAN GETS BACK.

THE sounds that had attracted the attention of Ragged Rufe came from the direction of Neddy's Jungle. Trouble had been brewing there ever since Gentle Joe had bluffed his way out on his pair of sixes. Though it had not developed into a regular clemente there was a very pretty little fracas in progress.

Neddy—and there were not half a dozen men in town who knew any other name for the proprietor—had held his peace while Lipscombe was on the defensive. Perhaps he preferred, if the little gambler was to have a fight for his life, that the battle should come off in the Jungle.

Dave Dukely was somebody else, and when that worthy resented some of the insinuations that one or two of the bystanders let fall, and offered to pull his guns, Neddy suddenly grasping him from behind, threw him out of the door, which he closed with a slam.

Then he stepped to one side, and waited for developments.

The suspense did not last very long; when Dave had picked himself up, and turned around once or twice to get his bearings, he began to shoot first and swear afterward. In the midst of his ovation came Ragged Rufe, with the two men he had picked up in tow.

When there was an opening of any kind the man of rags always showed a willingness to insert himself, and he saw his chance now. His ponderous paw fell on the arm of Dukely.

"Ah, ole man, are yer *reely* mad? 'cos ef you be yer' puttin' yerself in a heap ov danger fur nothin'. Ef I owed thet shebang in thar, an' war thirstin' fur blood, yer couldn't set me up a neater lay-out than jist this hyar. Ther biggest fool in Arizony couldn't miss yer ef he laid his gun on ther winder an' tuk a rest."

"Who in blazes be you?" fiercely turning as he spoke. He had a very good mad on, and was willing to make a break in almost any direction so that he got even with somebody.

"Don't put on airs, David. I'm yer Uncle Rufus; an' I'm jist a-tryin' ter save yer life. Ef yer must hev it out with somebody kim inside an' try it on with ther hull gang. What's broke loose, anyhow?"

"You're another of 'em, are yer? Git out ov this afore I break yer all apart. I've hed Gentle Joe rammed down my throat ter-night about twice oftener than I can stand. You're one ov his pals. You jist dry up an' pass on afore I git mad an' go ter git even on you."

"So you ain't mad yit? That's jist what I was askin'. Ain't I givin' yer the best ov advice? Go in an' shoot out. You'll have all out ov doors ter aim at, an' maybe you kin hit suthin'. So fur yer ain't hit ther side ov ther house."

"You want it, do you? All right. There, yer got it."

For some reason Ragged Rufe seemed resolved to pick a quarrel with the man, and he was met fully half way. As he spoke Dave Dukely swung out his fist with as vicious an intent as he could well have shown, and if he

did not floor the man of rags it was not for want of good intention.

"Oh, no, Mr. Dukely," laughed Rufe, as he parried the blow with no mean science.

"Ef I war a hasty man, I'd pull back both hammers, an' yank on ther triggers. Yer see, I'm jest about ez tough a case ez yerself, an' mebbe I've traveled jest ez fur."

"Then, what in sanctified blazes does yer want with me? Yer got Gentle Joe layin' back somewheres near, ter chip in, when yer gits ther chance?"

Dave Dukely's wrath was not at such a boiling pitch as to make him forget his caution, and this was a very natural suggestion. He stopped at the first reverse and waited to see further.

"Don't you fret yerself 'bout Joe Lipscombe. Joe runs his own game, 'thout a caper, an' when he wants ter chip he don't do it over anybody's shoulder. I'm jest a-suggestin', an' ef it don't strike yer whar yer live I ain't got no more ter say. Ef ther ain't no fun on ther outside ov ther Jungle, I'll go on an' see how she are on ther inside."

And very coolly Primrose turned away and entered the saloon by the door through which his two companions had already preceded him. In this way he had broken the time of their arrival, and had put up a little job on Dukely by which he believed that he would force him to show his hand a little later.

Mordaunt Mortimer, it seemed, had entered by himself. As far as a man could, under the prevailing suspense as to the outcome of the pretty little quarrel between Dukely and the proprietor of the Jungle, he had attracted to himself all the attention of the crowd, and there were plenty of glances spared as he moved up toward the bar.

"I am looking for a man known here as Lipscombe, and was directed hither as a place where I might obtain some information. Has he been seen about here to-night?"

The coolness of the stranger in the midst of the subdued but powerful excitement, did more for him than anything else could have done. Lame Johnny, the bartender, turned toward him with an approving smile.

"You've come ter ther right shop, but a leetle late in ther evenin'. Joe war hyer, but Joe hes skipped; an' there's no sayin' when he'll turn up ag'in. Yer might hang 'round a bit an' see. We won't charge yer a cent, an' 'll throw in a heap of fun besides."

"My luck to a fraction. I might have expected it. I did, in fact. Any reason for his skipping?"

"You hear that blame fool outside thar? That ain't ther reason prezactly, but that's suthin' ter do with it. Mart Hammers is a man, and Mart Hammers was a-talkin' to him, with that galoot as part ov his backin'. Joe bluffed ther hull gang, but he got, an' now Dukely are a-howlin' over it. Ther boss showed him ther door, an' he's jest a-lettin' him have a howl outside, 'thout a-worryin'; but ef Josey comes along an' hears sich loose talk, he'll be apt ter pin him up fer a sample."

"Then you think that Mr. Lipscombe will be back again this evening?"

"Life's uncertain; but if he don't meet with no backset, an' hez stren'th ter crawl, I wouldn't be surprised if he would be 'round, ez usual. Anything pertick'ler?"

"Yes, something very particular. I have some intelligence for him for which he ought to be truly grateful."

"Old pard of hissen, be yer?"

"Yes, yes. No doubt he will remember me the moment he sets eyes on me. I have some news in regard to a fortune to which he lately became heir; and some other still more private matters. Let him know, if you see him before I do."

"All correct. I'll do that very thing. Meanwhile, ef you'd jest stand a leetle ter ther right, you'd be outen ov range with that winder. When Dave Dukely does shoot, he's that keerless like that he'd jest ez soon hit er stranger. What did yer say war ther variety yer most loved ter taste?"

"The question is quite natural, though I am ashamed to say that I had not yet named it."

"Gentlemen, will you join me?"

Of course there was very little hesitation. The loafers ranged themselves at the bar, and whisky all around was poured out.

Then the people of the Bar, taking their cue from the man at the further end, and

with a unanimous motion, tossed their liquor off, and set their glasses down with a simultaneous crash. It must have really been a matter of some little practice, and Lame Johnny gave a smile and a wink as he motioned with his thumb toward the thirsty line.

"Ever seen anything ter beat em'? The lambs of the Jungle kin take ther fodder by note. Ef you hed ther rest ov 'em, ez are listenin' ter Davy, at ther door, they'd jest empty a barrel. Git 'em all together sometime. It's wuth seein'; and don't cost more than ef yer took 'em one at a time."

"Thanks for the suggestion. If I stay long enough I shall be happy to do it. Ah, what is the trouble now?"

The trouble was that the door had been flung open again, and in stepped a dozen resolute men, headed by Mart Hammers. With them, though not of the same party, and evidently just met, were Mr. Cathcart and Major Widespin.

The two fell aside in earnest converse; the others marched straight over to where the cross-eyed man was seated.

Trinnfador, if that was his name, had managed to repair damages to a great extent, and his clothing, though patched, pieced and darned, gave no direct token of the struggle of the night before, while his face was unruffled, and his attitude entirely unconcerned.

At the approach of Hammers he scarcely straightened up, though he nodded in a heavy sort of way.

"I wouldn't come no nearder onless ye'r a canderdate fur ther bone-yard," he growled, apparently looking Mart straight in the eyes.

"Las' night I tuk it rough an' tumble an' yer didn't give me half a fair shake. Ter-night I'm right in town, all dressed up fur biz. When I cut loose, ef I hev ter, you'll hear diff'rent music. What's it goin' ter be; peace er war?"

Mordaunt's operations at the bar having drawn the crowd away in that direction it left an open space around the cross-eyed man; and as his back was against the wall he had a fair view of the men that he had every reason to believe were his enemies, without troubling himself about his flanks.

At this cool defiance Mart was staggered and turned to his men.

"Blame me ef I don't begin ter think there's bin mistakes all 'round. This galoot ain't a fit subjeck fur hangin'—he's ez crazy ez a bed-bug. Ther ain't no man with a head half way down to ther level ez would come in hyer, after slippin' clear by ther skin ov his teeth, an' try ter buck ther town."

"Gentle Joe did it!" said a voice that was pitched in a high, shrill key, evidently one of disguise.

"Oh, thar wasn't much ag'in' Joe, 'cept backin' this very gerloot; and that in a half-hearted way. An' Joe b'longs hyar, ef he does hail frum Jumptown. But this sucker don't b'long nowhar, an' might jest ez well 'a' moved on to ther next camp an' saved trouble. It wasn't him we war after now; but bein' ez we find him in ther road we may ez well take him in. Eh, boys?"

This was the truth, since the party had not yet heard of Trinnfador's return when the start was made for the Jungle; and Gentle Joe was the man they were after. But the fact was that honest Mart Hammers, who had kicked hard enough, the night before when singled out as the man to run things, had been so badgered that he was in a tearing bad humor; and when he had got out of the range of Lipscombe's friends had been very easily convinced that he had neglected his duty and dropped his sand when he failed at least to hold Joe for the decision of the Lynch court which he could very easily reconvene.

It was natural enough, then, that when Hammers saw the cross-eyed man he should go for him; and just as natural that the bluff should arouse the worst side of his nature, however much he might try to keep his passion down. The appeal to the men at his back was more a matter of form than anything else.

The answer, though, chimed in with his own feelings. A dozen voices chorused:

"Right you are, Mart; take him in."

"Fur what?" asked Trinnfador, brazenly looking around.

"Ther jury, las' night, sed fur what. Ef

that ain't ernuf you kin call fur a new trial, an' ef what we hearn ter-day are true, it won't do you much good."

"Dunno 'bout that," retorted the man, somewhat reflectively. "Las' night thar war jest a howl raised an' they tried ter run me through. Now, thet things hez cooled off a leetle, mebbe I'd hev a fair shake. Say, pards, I've come hyar ter stay, an' I want terstart squar'. Ef I hold me hands up will yer guarantee a white performance an' no skull-duggery? All I ax are ter hev a chance ter show I ain't no sich critter ez they painted me; an' then live in peace an' quiet."

"That much Blazer's Bar ought to promise, to any man," said Mordaunt Mortimer, stepping forward. "I am a stranger in this camp, and perhaps I could talk the matter over with less prejudice than the most of you. What do you say Mr.—Mr. Hammers. Cannot I, in the name of your people, guarantee to this individual the very treatment he asks for?"

"What do yer take us fur, hyar? In course. We'll give him another, an' an honest show fur his white ally. Ef he kin pull through then he kin set down hyar an' stay till ther cow's horns drop off, an' ef ary galoot treads on his toes 'thout givin' warnin' Mart Hammer 'll be ther fu'st ter see him through ther rifle."

"Good ernuff," heartily responded Abednego; "but how's that fur high?"

So closely together that the bystanders could scarcely catch the shade of time between them, two pistol-shots rung through the room, and Trinnfador staggered back to the wall with a smutch of blood on his forehead, and a smoking pistol in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BABY BURT GETS IN A LITTLE ONE, STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER.

ABOUT half the spectators actually thought Trinnfador was the sole victim, and he had been brought down by a treacherous shot, fired by some one outside of the circle. When they heard a groan and a fall behind them there was a surprise, that was hardly lessened when they comprehended the true inwardness of the affair.

Dave Dukely's revolver was out too—and its owner was on the floor. Trinnfador might be looking at no one in particular, or he might be apparently staring into the eyes of Mart Hammers; but all the same he was keeping a weather eye out for danger, and had spotted Dukely as he was drawing a bead on him from his place of semi-concealment in the rear of the crowd.

Then, with his hand held low down, he shot from under his skirt, in time, at least, to disarrange the aim that would otherwise have been deadly. The ball plowed a ridge along the upper corner of his forehead, and sent him gasping backward. But it was only for an instant that he was off of his base.

"That's yer fair play, Mart Hammers! You kin stand an' pump wind while yer gang gits in ther work. I dunno why I don't send you over ther range, which I kin do ez easy ez I dropped that carrion. Yer can't ketch Abednego asleep—an' you bet yer bottom dollar he looks all ways ter once. You kin prance round me back, er you kin peddle wind all night in front, an' I don't keer a continental; but ther man ez draws on me ter ther back, front er sideways, drops; an' don't yer disremember!"

For pure sand, in offering a bluff to the Bar after shots had been fired, Abednego certainly took the cake.

"The confounded fool," said Major Widespin to Cathcart, in a low tone. "Can't he see that he is setting up the pins so that Mart and his crowd *must* make a strike? He looks like a good man and acts like a good man, but he can't get away with a dozen, even if he does look every way at once. The chances are there will be a lively time here; and as I am not a fighting man, and you are a stranger, I think we had better get out."

"How about the wounded man? Is he dying?" retorted Cathcart, who, tenderfoot though he was, seemed the cooler of the two.

"Like as not. Some of his pards are carrying him out, and as they will most likely send a volley in through the window, it is time to go. We have no business here."

"Wait a moment. This gets interesting. I am interested in your Western jurisprudence, and I'll risk a chance shot for the sake of seeing it through. Don't be alarmed on my account. I'll keep a close eye on you, and when you dodge, I'll squat. I've an idea the cross-eyed villain is not as big a scoundrel as he looks, and I want to see just what sort of a share that gaunt, long-legged scalawag has in the game. Altogether, it strikes me as a very pretty affair."

The major looked at his companion doubtfully. He had no desire to pose as an example, where a mistake in following the copy might be attended with fatal results; and in Blazer's Bar he was scarcely considered an authority.

The reference to Mordant Mortimer seemed to cause him further uneasiness. Two more dissimilar persons could not have existed; yet that was no reason why he and Trinnfador should not be partners. If they were, the obstinacy of the cross-eyed man in refusing to take safety when he had it in his grasp might have an explanation more definite than the one of "pure cussedness."

Mortimer had shrunk back at the shooting, but he was still there, and might come to the front again. From Cathcart, Widespin turned to him.

Mortimer showed none of the nervousness that had possessed him at the time of the attack of Royal George, and was surveying the room with a grim smile on his hard-cut lips.

"He is looking for somebody," said Cathcart, marking the direction the eyes of his companion were taking.

The major nodded, and turned his face away, making a gesture toward Trinnfador. The fun there was about to begin again. No immediate rust had followed the sharp accusation flung at Hammers, because Mart himself was staggered, his friends were waiting on him, some were carrying out Dave Dukely, and the balance that had an interest were planning a more certain way to get even with a man that shot without looking and put his bullets just where he wanted them.

As Widespin turned away he did not see what Cathcart did, that Mordant gave a glance toward the cross-eyed man—and, at the same time, a shake of the head.

Perhaps Trinnfador saw him, but it was just then that Mart Hammers took a few steps forward, utterly disregarding the ready pistols that now graced the hands of the obstinate stranger.

"We can't blame yer fer ther shot ez it seemed ter be yer life er his, an' him a-ringin' in from ther outside, inter what wa'n't his circus; but yer must see yer' in a heap ov danger, an' ef I stand aside ther boys'll jist riddle yer. I'm tryin' ter do ther thing decent, but it's the last askin'. Hands up!"

"All right," sung out the cross-eyed man, and then he changed his base just in time. One minute he was crouching against the wall, his eyes rolling as restless and shifting as those of a caged wild beast. The next he had hurled himself forward, knocking down Hammers in his rush, and picking up a chair as he went crashing through the throng and out of the window like a human cyclone.

Not a soul anticipated the movement, and only one tried with any prospect of success to stop it.

In a masculine-like way Major Widespin, as Hammers went down, snatched his revolver from his belt, and raising his arm, fired.

Even a random shot at such close quarters might find the bull's eye and Widespin would have begged big game and had some show to lay claim to the title of chief had he been a shade sooner; but just as mechanically Mr. Cathcart threw up his hand, striking the major's wrist.

The bullet bedded itself in the ceiling as Trinnfador went out of sight, and though half a dozen shots followed, they were wasted in the empty air or buried harmlessly in the window-frame. Nobody shot very wild, but a miss was as good as a mile.

Following the shots came a rush, some springing to the window, others boling to the door, the noise made deadening the sound of a brief conflict without, of which only Cathcart, the major, and one or two others, got a glimpse.

As Widespin had suggested, two or three men had coolly made their way to the window from the outside, with the intention

of potting their man from that vantage-ground.

They lingered on the shot a little too long. Before they could get a fair chance through the throng that stood in their way, the human thunderbolt was out and at work among them.

In spite of the way he was being crowded, he did not strike to slay; but he made the liveliest time for the party that they had ever had a hand in.

As he burst through, he landed on the neck of an anxious marksman.

He went down without knowing what had struck him.

Then Trinnfador hit out left and right, and had the pleasure of feeling both blows connect.

A fourth man came running up. He had his revolver in his hand, and would have had time to shoot if he had been certain of his mark. While he peered around, a grip of steel closed on his neck, another on his leg, and he was tossed in through the window with the velocity of a stone flung from a catapult. The road was open, and all that Abednego had to do was to take it.

He was in no hurry, however, but turned to the racket behind him.

"Ye'r givin' me a hot recepshun, but yer can't make me take water. I've come ter settle, an' I'm hyar ter stay. When I call 'round ag'in, I'll hev suthin' furdur ter say!"

He might have spared the boast and utilized his time to better advantage. A couple of shots came hurtling out in answer to his bold defiance, hissing unpleasantly near, and as he wheeled to go a single man came dashing up, evidently attracted by the hubbub.

"Hold on, hyar! What's ther racket? Don't go no furdur, stranger, till we see what we can do fur you!"

Trinnfador's answer was a right-hander that would have floored a mule.

Perhaps his success had made him careless—the mule wasn't there.

On the contrary, the blow was parried with a scientific ease that was wonderful, while the return came booming along without an instant's delay.

It was too late to guard, and Trinnfador ducked his head in a way that was almost successful. The stroke took him high up on the forehead, and straightened him out as though he had been hit with an ax.

"That's right, leetle man, take yer gruel kindly. Yer hev ter git up very early in the mornin' ter git by ther Baby with ther mauleys."

Baby Burt had got back to camp, and immediately began on business.

"Jump him! Hold him tight! Blow a hole through him! Sink a shaft! Rig a rope!"

There were a dozen voices yelling at once, as the crowd rushed up.

Unmoved by the babel, Burt stood with folded arms, looking down at the form of the cross-eyed man, waiting for him to make a movement to get away, and wondering who he might be. His attitude, without meaning it, gave Trinnfador a show for his life. Had it not been that a few of the foremost held off until the Baby decided what he would do with his prisoner, he would have climbed the golden stairway before he had time to understand that he was beaten at his own game.

"Wait a bit thar," said the Baby, extending his hands in a gesture that almost looked like ownership.

"I got him, an' I'll keep him till yer lets me inter ther racket. I ain't a-knockin' down fur all Blazer's ter drag out ag'in."

"Don't be a fool, Baby. It's ther blasted cut-throat ther boyces war goin' ter string up last night. Ef they'd 'a' done it, they'd 'a' saved lots o' trouble. He's jist laid out Mart Hammers an' a couple more. I'll bet you ain't a-takin' up fur him."

"Ye'r right. I didn't onderstand rightly who be 'war—but do it decent. I ain't allowin' no outside heathen ter scalp my copar."

"That's so, Baby," said Mart Hammers, staggering forward. "I said I'd gi'n him a show, an' ef he got a send-off it'd be squar' an' reg'lur. Ef he hedn't took his own part, I'd 'a' done it fur him; an' I don't count this knock-down ag'in' him. Turn him over ter me, Baby. Ther town put this hyar thing

inter my hands, an' I'm a-goin' ter run it—not meanin' anythin' ag'in' you an' yer pard, Baby, which ther same are good men."

"Have yer own way, an' I'll back it."

The answer produced a growl of discontent that had the immediate effect of stiffening up, both Burt and Mart Hammers. The former bent over his prisoner, who had just given his first uneasy motion after the blow, and gathering both wrists in one of his huge paws, turned to Mart.

"What is it, pard? Jest ez yer say, so she are."

"No more night work in mine; I'm goin' ter see this thing out by daylight er bu'st a wheel. Gentlemen, this court are adjourned till to-morrer mornin' at nine o'clock. My friends'll back me that fur, an' them ez don't hez ther chance ter show the'r hands. Mine are full."

And what Honest Mart meant by that last, no one for a moment misunderstood.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHERE THE BABY HAD BEEN.

THE shot that dropped Jess Hurley had sent the Baby cowering back to cover, but it was not from any want of courage. He was as willing as any one to face a loaded revolver, though its use did not come so natural to him. He had the nature of a bull-dog, and always preferred to fight with his own teeth.

He could use a revolver, though, when it became necessary, and as he shrunk away he drew the one that for the most part reposed undisturbed at his hip. His idea was shrewd enough, too. If Jess was dead all the help he could try to give him wasn't worth the least risk, while if living he had to get rid of the assailants who had already wrought such harm before he could hope to be of any use. They would certainly not do anything for the wounded man, and would just as surely take him in if he gave them the chance.

If Jess had been in his place he would have shot first and considered these points afterward, but Burt was slow in thought and rather accustomed to seeing his way clear before he acted. By the time he saw his way clear in this case, his chance was well nigh gone. The man who had fired the shot dropped suddenly out of sight, just as the Baby's eyes rested on him squarely and his hand was rising, with his finger beginning to rest heavily on the trigger.

The other man had been in the background from the start, and Burt did not know where to look for him, so that when the shooter vanished it required careful work to keep from exposing himself to the fire of one or the other. That both of them were on the lookout there could be but little doubt.

The body of Hurley lay there as a tempting bait. When the Baby thought he detected a slight motion of the limbs, as he turned a glance in that direction, it was as much as he could do to refrain from rushing forward in spite of everything.

"It won't do, though," he muttered. "They mean biz, an' ef they took me in that would be ther last chance gone fur pore Jess. I must go jest ez he would go ef he war a-runnin' ther concern. Hyar goes fur it. I'll take a crawl, an' see ef I can't unkiver 'em. Ef I can't I'll 'pear ter give 'em a show, an' scoop 'em in by strategy."

Acting on this principle, he edged carefully forward, and began a circle of the moonlit little vista.

His progress at the start was provokingly slow, but as minutes passed without hearing a sound, or meeting with the two skulkers he knew to be near, he grew more reckless. Up he rose, right in the fullest glare of the moonlight, as though inviting a shot.

Instead, a man stepped suddenly into the vista and toward him.

The man rose behind him, and had all the chance in the world for as sure a shot as he had taken at Hurley, but something held his hand. He raised his revolver, it is true, and his finger was ready on the trigger; but instead of firing he made a low noise, as if he was involuntarily clearing his throat.

At the sound the Baby wheeled.

"I wouldn't, Burt; I really wouldn't," said the man, a smile on his lips.

"You see I have you covered, and my pard behind you has it all set to rake you in if I miss. Throw up your hands and listen to reason."

The voice all along had sounded familiar; the face appeared more so, and the Baby gave an ejaculation of surprise.

"Gentle Joel!" he exclaimed, and then, with a quickness that excited even his own wonder, he took a snap shot at the face before him.

A mocking laugh was the answer to his offer. Though he felt sure the bullet was going home, it had apparently been wasted on the air.

"None of that, Baby. You can't hit the side of a barn, but you make a mark, as you stand there, that is just too sweet for anything. Another such an effort and I will have to take you in. Jess was a better man than you ever dare be, but he was too fresh with his tools and lies just where you will if you try any more nonsense. I want to have a little talk with you. Last time of asking. Hold up your hands."

It wasn't murder that the party was after now; that much was certain, here was the chance, already, to shoot him several times over. His dogged nature made Burt refuse to yield, even though he fancied there was a chance for his life in so doing.

"You cussed, double-dealin' traitor, yer can't skeer me; an' I won't give an inch ter such ez you be. Ef yer want ter talk—talk; ef yer want ter shoot—shoot. Anyway be quick about it er I'll run the chance an' try a blizzard at yer. Better take me in outen ther damp while yer hez ther chance. Ef yer don't, sooner er later I'll be even with you."

"Why, you infernal old idiot, I've been treating you better than you deserved, ten times over. Haven't you any gratitude at all? If your pard had not come nosing around about a thing that didn't concern him anyhow he would have been alive and kicking. If you won't beg, down you go. Hit him, Jan."

For the first time Baby Burt suspected that he was looking on the wrong side for danger. He half turned—but he turned too late. A crushing blow, delivered on the back of his neck, with the butt of a revolver, brought him to his knees, and the hand that dealt the stroke was raised to repeat the effort. Another moment and his brains might have suffered; but an interruption came, just in time.

"Hold on thar," cried a husky voice.

"Royal George hez suthin' ter say ter this. You two fellers kin hold up yer own hands. We are 'round hyar an' we mean biz."

The two men had undoubtedly been off their guard, but had they been listening ever so carefully they would not have detected the approach of the speaker, for he came noiselessly as a phantom.

Instead of throwing their hands up at the challenge each gave a backward spring and landed in the concealment of the shadow just as there came the rush of half a dozen men, who dashed past Burt without stopping to see whether he was harmed or not.

The effort was vain, however, for there was no trace of the fugitives, though for an instant there was a sound in the distance that might be the noise of trampling feet hurrying away from the spot.

The pursuit was briefly vigorous; Royal George and his men almost immediately returned.

There was the body of Jess Hurley, and kneeling almost over it, staring at it in a dazed, almost idiotic way, was Baby Burt.

"Hyar, sonny, I guess you don't want them any more. What's ther use ov a man like you kerryin' tools anyhow? We'll jist take charge ov them till yer seem ter hev some use fur 'em."

Without resistance Burt suffered the revolvers to be drawn from his grasp. If he looked up without fear it was also without understanding.

"I reckon yer can't sabbe ef I speak slow an' very plain."

The Baby shook his head, but whether it was because he understood the question was by no means certain. As it was in a negative way probably he did not.

"Wal, ther fact are we hev'n't a bit ov use fur you, an' we can't afford 'ter be layin' 'round hyar waitin' fur yer ter git back ern'uf life ter walk. Ef we leave yer hyar them ger-tools'll be back an' give yer a shake-up that'll be an everlastin' sickness. Ter save suf-

ferin' I dunno' but what it'd be as well ter lift yer brain-pan an' then berry ther corpus."

"I'm a-stayin' with my pard," mumbled Burt in a half audible way. "Ef he's dead kill me too; I ain't no more use when Jess goes over ther range."

"Jess ain't dead, ole man, an' we want him. Ef we take keer ov him will you git? Ef ther's ary foolishness we'll jist hev ter kill yer both."

The threat was the best thing that could have been done to bring back the Baby's wandering senses. He rubbed his arm across his forehead, stared at the seeming corpus, and then at the man bending over him.

"Not dead! Ef I'd a know'd that! Stand aside thar, ther Baby's comin'."

He threw his hands to one side and the other, as he did in the time of his strength, and attempted to swing his way among them as of old. If his body responded as it usually did he would have made lively work, unarmed as he was.

The effort only showed how stunning had been the blow that had felled him. He stumbled, half regained his footing, and then fell headlong.

"Purty neat work, this hyar," said the leading man of the crowd, not paying the least attention to the fallen Baby.

"Jist plastered ther life in him so it couldn't kim out er go in. Two or three ov ver tote him along till it's safe ter gi'n him a better boost, an' ther rest ov yer, ef yer kin handle thet young cierphunt, drag him outen range ov them gerloots ef they kim back. They may change the'r minds an' go fur his top-knot ef they find thet Jess bes got outen reach."

The order was obeyed without a murmur, though the removal of Burt was a contract that caused some puffing and blowing. In a heavy, aimless sort of way he began to squirm, and before they had gone a rod they were compelled to tie his wrists and ankles. In that way his returning strength profited him nothing, and he finally submitted without a word, though from time to time the way his teeth grated was enough to show that he was anything but a submissive lamb.

"Thar yer be. We'll let yer hands loose an' I guess yer kin work ther rest ov ther racket accordin' ter yer strength. I'll give a squint this hyar ways ter-morrer ter see thet nothin' ain't happened. By-by."

Then the gang trooped away, carrying the motionless Hurley among them. When they had gone some little distance he was placed on one of the horses they came to, a man mounting behind him, and all proceeded in silence. Royal George had gathered one more fish in with his drag-net, while the Baby was left to work his way back to the Bar at his convenience. How he made his reappearance there the reader has lately seen. He had made an unavailing search for his pard, and at last, when driven in by hunger, went back, doubly desperate, and just ready for the work he found ready to his hands.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CATHCART COMES TO THE FRONT.

BLAZER'S BAR meant business.

No one but the few behind the scenes understood how the thing had been worked up the preceding evening when the cross-eyed man was brought to book; and this evening's performances seemed only a natural corollary.

When matters had once gone this far men were too excited to think; even Mr. Cathcart felt the subtle influence of the nervous excitement that swayed the crowd.

No wonder.

Men were thronging around like angry bees, lights flared in the darkness, there was a wicked hum, occasional shots, frequent yells, and in the midst of it all two men making a stand for law and order—the Baby from the principle of general cussedness, and Mart Hammers because it was his nature to do the square thing. As Mordaunt Mortimer had prudently remained within the shelter of the Jungle he didn't count for the present.

When Mart announced that his hands were full the town about came to the conclusion that it had no more use for him and the wonder was that he did not drop at the instant he concluded his little speech. That he didn't was because, though there were twenty men

clamoring for a rope, there was as yet no one for a leader. Even Dave Dukely would have been better than no one if he could have come to the fore just then; but till some one squarely answered Mart, and indicated the intention of the camp, no one wanted to fire the first shot at a man that had always been deservedly popular. As for Trinnfador—it was tacitly understood that he was to be saved for the cord, and nothing else.

While Mart Hammers held the town at bay, Baby Burt was taking advantage of the situation, and was slowly backing toward cover in the jungle, carrying the cross-eyed man with as much ease as though he was an infant.

Finally, with a bound, he went through the doorway, followed, an instant after, by Mart. They had won the first hand in the game; how about the next?

When Major Widespin and Mr. Cathcart had entered the saloon at the heels of the surging crowd, they found that in some occult manner Trinnfador had been spirited away. He was not to be seen; but the two men who had constituted themselves his guard, were there, standing behind the bar, as unconcerned as though they had nothing to fear, and no desperate pledge to keep.

"Jest a minnit, boyecs, afore the circus begins. Ef ye'r in earnest it's purty sure thar's a number ov ye'll never pull off yer coats ag'in, an' it's a sure thing thet Baby an' I'll go under. That's all right. This hyar's a free country, an' we've all had our ch'ice. I want yer ter understand I ain't no hard feelin's ag'in nobody; I jest axe right down ter ther line, an' let ther chips fall whar they want ter. Hevin' sed that much, I'll add thet thar's a dead line drawed now in front ov ther bar. Them ez steps over it goes up ther flume, onless Baby an' me hez fust climbed ther golden stairs. Are yer all ready? Ef so, sail in."

Mart Hammers dropped his words out in a low, dogged tone, and they had their effect. Nobody else in town could have talked so to them; and it looked as though the warning was going to call a halt. For half a minute at least there was no answer.

Then some one, whose voice was sufficiently disguised to be unknown, gave a rallying whoop.

"It's only two men ag'in' ther town; take 'em ez he sez, an' hyar goes fur a rush."

The last word was hardly as distinctly spoken as it appears in print.

There was the sound of a solid blow, and a falling man. For the first time Mr. Cathcart had taken a hand—and on what certainly seemed to be the losing side. He had not far to reach, and he hit out suddenly with a snap at a critical moment.

Then he sprung fiercely into the crowd, and seized a second man by the wrists, bringing them behind their owner's back by a dexterous wrench, that looked as though it might have been learned by much practice.

The man he had struck down was Mordaunt Mortimer; the man upon whom he had fixed his grasp was Gentle Joe, who had come gliding into the room but a moment before.

"Just in time to save your life, my festive friend," whispered Cathcart. "That scoundrel had the drop on you, and meant to take it. I want you, though, and for fear there may be some kind of a complication before this thing gets over I'll take you now. Will you go peaceably; or must I put on the bracelets?"

A dog fight would break up a council of kings; the side issue so unexpectedly introduced stopped the rush that was just on the tremble. The man who had elected to lead it had staggered back when Mordaunt fell against him; and the rest of Blazer's wanted to know what was the matter.

Lipscombe showed his wisdom.

Taken at such disadvantage it would have been vain to struggle. He answered as coolly as though he was drawing to a bobtail flush from a bug under the table, and the man on the other side was a tenderfoot tramp.

"What's the game? I just got in, and haven't seen enough to guess the racket."

"The game is five thousand dollars reward for Caton Ormsby; and you're the man. There's a fortune in the air; but you'll grace the dock before you have a chance to finger it."

"You're a detective, are you? Very well. Let up, I'll go quietly to where we can talk the matter over. If you think, after that, that you have any use for me I'll go further; but when you get back, across the mountains they will laugh you out of the force."

"Don't be so desperately cool; I'd sooner have you squirm a little. I would feel less as though I would have to kill you before I get through. No nonsense, now. I've taken the risks; I'm going to share the profits."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cathcart, who had so suddenly changed base, and blossomed out in a new role, had been edging his prisoner toward the door. He had a wholesome regard for the advisability of leaving the Jungle at the earliest practicable moment, if he desired to hold him for good and all.

The laugh had a peculiarly irritating effect, for he recognized it in a minute as belonging to Ragged Rufe.

He turned his glance over his shoulder and spoke hotly.

"See here. If you know what is good for you you will keep out of this. You are the wildest fraud I ever did see; but you are something worse. You make some mighty big guesses at everything; but you manage to be wrong all the time."

"All right, ef yer think ther Primrose that kind ov a hair-pin. I couldn't help laffin', though, ter think how you war mixin' yer drinks. I thort I'd bin a fool, but you jest take ther deck."

"Let those laugh that win. I warn you not to interfere."

"I ain't interferin'; I'm only tryin' ter coax yer not ter sp'ile sport. Yer think I can't remember a man ez I see'd in me ba'my days? Thar ain't no five thousand dollars reward, this man ain't Caton Ormsby, an' yander stan's Neil Kavanaugh. I see it all now, an' ef you don't, go on with yer cock-fightin' an' I'll stan' back an' grin. Yer needn't think I'm a-throwin' off on yer fur ther sake of me ole side pard. I don't jest guess—"

Ragged Rufe's explanation came to a sudden ending, consequent upon the unexpected antics of Gentle Joe. The words of Primrose had galvanized him into life. He cast a sharp glance at him, and another about the room, which brought his eyes around just in time to see Mortimer rising from the floor a pistol in his hand.

At that he thrust his hands further behind him, giving at the same time a dexterous kick. Then, with a firm grip on Cathcart's clothing, he bent suddenly forward.

Small blame to the detective if his grip was broken as his heels went up in the air, or that Gentle Joe, breaking loose with the effort, sprung straight at Mordaunt Mortimer before that worthy had time to take aim.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR. CATHCART STRIKES A NEW VEIN.

AFTER showing the nerve that it certainly required to make an arrest at the Jungle, it was pretty clear that Mr. Cathcart would be a bad man to get away with. If Gentle Joe had taken him at a disadvantage, it was no more than could have happened to any man, and the expectation that he would stay in the game till the last card fell was not a very wild one.

He was on his feet again in a moment, and plunging forward.

There was where he showed that he had been brought up in a different school from that which was the popular one around Blazer's Bar. An old timer there, after things had gone that far, would scarcely have thought of going for his man without his irons out and ready for immediate use.

"That kind of work takes a cultivated instinct, and Mr. Cathcart might have been pardoned for the freshness that sent him forward with an outstretched hand, reaching for Lipscombe's neck, just as the fingers of the little sport tightened on the throat of Mordaunt Mortimer.

"You cowardly, lecherous, treacherous villain!" he hissed, as his grip tightened. "You are too wicked to die and too worthless to live. I half suspected this; but if I had known where to find you, rest assured that you would not have had to come half-way to meet me. There! And there! And there!"

He punctured the last words with three blows with his open hand, not to hurt, though they fell with a ringing emphasis that made the fingers of those that heard them tingle.

Then he sprung back—so avoiding Mr. Cathcart—and stood facing the man, who seemed for the moment utterly bewildered by the savage onslaught.

"How's that fur s'perior elevashun?" asked Ragged Rufe. "Ain't he jest jay-bird? Ain't a-keerin' a conternental fur nothin'? Knock him all apart an' he jest sets 'em up on ther other alley an' goes right along. Don't ye think, Johnny, yer hed better hold on till some one loans yer a quarter? I really don't expose it's healthy fur a man 'bout your size ter be spreadin' hisself in a mix like those. Ther boys like fair play, an' you might ketch ther lead fever ef yer interfered afore this leetle matter are settled an' done fur. Hold on; I'd jest advise yer ter hold on."

Rufus was right in the way of Cathcart's rush, and though his voice was as coarse and careless as ever, it was a fair guess that he meant all that he said, and more.

Just when another man would have been the maddest, John Cathcart grew suspiciously cool. He halted suddenly.

"What is the meaning of this? What sort of a quarrel is it that won't keep even under such circumstances? Who is that man?"

He pointed to Mordaunt Mortimer; and the bummer answered, with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"That's ther corpus derlickdecus, round w'ich, ez a hub, ther hull thing revolves. Ef you'll wait long enuf you'll see ther Gentle kill him, an' then you kin go back in peace an' quiet. They'll try Joe hyar, er not at all!"

"Yes, if we stand by and see murder done. It must not be. Hold!"

"Don't fret yerself," retorted Rufe, in his oiliest tones. "You've struck it rich; an' ef ther eends ov jestic are ter be served, ain't I hyar? An' ef it's a fair fou't, ain't all Blazer's hyar ter say, Amen an' not guilty? Joseph won't cross ther briny ontill he's ready, an' you kin stack all yer duckats on that keard. Now you sabbe?"

"Not yet, and as you put it. Who is that man?"

He pointed at Mortimer but looked at Gentle Joe.

"That man," answered the bummer, "are Mordaunt Mortimer—otherwise, Major Neil Kavanaugh—what war killed some years ago. Ef I war you, I'd let things drop. Yer ain't got a leg left ter stand on."

It was a fact that Mr. Cathcart had never seen Major Kavanaugh in the flesh; the appearance of Mortimer, the actions of Gentle Joe and the statement of Ragged Rufe, taken together, made him pause. Was it possible that the bummer did know the inside history of the case, and was giving him a square tip? Or could he only be patching up a lie on the instant, to fit every change in the scenes?

"You rum-soaked old scoundrel!" he hissed, "if I find you have been trying to play me for a flat, I'll make you wish you were dead! I'll wait and see, since I can scarcely go wrong. It don't look as though he was going to run away. Meantime, I don't want you to think he can get away. If I saw a chance for that, I'd first shoot you and then kill him!"

"Ye'r jist 'bout fool enough ter do them same thing, an' ef yer only hed a pard an' a place ter land me ye'd run me in afore I could wink. My darlin', yer ain't in ther Empire City; this are Blazer's. Watch an' see how they do things hyar."

Rufe kept one eye on the detective during this conversation, also one hand. The other hand was convenient to his gun, and the other eye was turned toward Gentle Joe. If he had been the cross-eyed man himself he could not have looked two ways at once in better style.

Mordaunt Mortimer—Major Kavanaugh as Rufus Primrose called him—had been full of deadly hate before; now he had reached the white-heat of anger. A downright, knock-down blow would not have maddened him nearly as much as the stinging contemptuous way in which he had been treated. A very bad man he might have been at home, but here he was of only moderate ac-

count when life hung on quick, open work. If Gentle Joe had so chosen he could have shot all around him. As it was he had both hands outstretched, a revolver in each with the hammers back, when Mortimer could look through the momentary mist that had been beclouding his eyes.

"I didn't suppose you would fight me fair," said Lipscombe, as he saw that the man realized the frail tenure on which his life was hanging.

"I tried to drag you up to the mark once before and failed, though you would have risked your neck to murder me in the dark. Now I'll give you one more chance to show your manhood, even though you have just tried several times over for a felon shot, for which, according to the law of the mines, I could shoot you down in cold blood. If you are man enough to face another man who has a pistol in his hand, say so, and I'll give you the chance. If not, say your prayers—quick."

"You can talk big when you know you have me where you can kill me before I can touch a trigger. Was it not for that we would hear another tune, or none at all. I dare meet you any and every time, with a chance or without one. These men around will see fair play and plenty of what they call fun. I am no match for you in this guerrilla sort of business—I acknowledge it—but when it comes to plain, straightforward shooting you will find me all there."

"Then have some man to set you up and I'll have a friend to place me. If you are as good as you say we'll both tumble, and the world will be well rid of us."

"Now, and here, then. With us living and in the same camp neither would dare sleep."

"Neither would want to sleep—I from hate, and you from fear. Ready?"

"Hold on, hold on. 'Pears ter me yer might hev some regard fur ther dignity ov ther place ef yer ain't fur me. When two gentlemen fouts each other in ther course ov biz I don't mind. That hez ter be so. But when two fellers gives warnin' thet they're just goin' ter sail in I don't consider it fair all around; an' I sez—go out-doors. Be yer goin'?"

The proprietor had suddenly awakened up to the demands of business; and decided that this was a case he could adjust.

Joe took the address in good part.

"Right you are, Neddy. There's a beautiful spot just outside of the door. Primrose will act for me; and I have no doubt but that this gentleman will act for you, Major Kavanaugh. He seems to be a kind of side pard and confidential friend, anyhow."

"Come," retorted Kavanaugh, you are wasting wind. I can't trust you; but I'll trust them behind you."

To show his good intentions he handed his revolvers to Mr. Cathcart, and looked around over the crowd.

The crowd had forgotten Abednego, for the most part; and were curious to find out what was in the wind now. Gentle Joe went through the door, and he was followed, first by Mortimer, and then by all the rest.

It was a lovely little place for the settlement of such an affair, and the spectators could only regret that the moonlight, bright though it was, could not be supplemented with a more effective illumination. They could see reasonably well, but the little minutiae, that make or break the gilt-edged nature of such affairs, might be lost.

A regular duel was as good as a circus, when it could be seen; but shadows in the starlight are peculiarly provoking, and the Bar, on second thought, was half inclined to think, if there was more danger in it for outsiders, there was still more satisfaction in a rough and tumble in the bar-room.

Mr. Cathcart took hold of his side of the ceremonies without any apparent reluctance, but with some curiosity.

Once on the ground, he looked up and down the street, to get the lay of the land, and then turned to his man.

"We are strangers in fact, but if what I have just heard from an outsider—whose word, as a general thing, is none too reliable—I should know something of you and your friends. I doubt if this is as profitable employment for you as you might find on the other side of the mountains, and if you are open to advice I would say, crawfish out if

you can, and go enjoy the patrimony that they are dividing up among a dozen."

"That is singular talk; what do you mean?"

The man drew himself up stiffly, as though offended at the freedom shown Mr. Cathcart, and then looked anxiously along to where his antagonist was waiting for him.

"I mean that if you are Major Neil Kavanaugh—"

"As I certainly am. This is one of the times when I do not care to deny the name."

"And if yonder is Caton Ormsby, who, for years, has been a fugitive from the suspicion of having killed you—"

"It is—I swear it. I'd know that face of his if I saw it in the midst of the flames of Hades! It's the face with the laugh on it that I saw years ago as he dropped me to a fate worse than death—to a living hell from which I have escaped doubly a devil. Enough. He is waiting. Give me the pistol. I have trained eye and nerve till I could cut the fringe off of his eye lashes at forty yards; and all for this meeting. I'll kill him now, and then I will go back."

He put all the fire of blazing passion in his tone. Yet an instant later he was cold as an iceberg as he reached out his hand for the weapon that Cathcart was extending toward him.

"All right, then. You know your own business best; but you've swindled me out of five thousand dollars' reward, that he would have been worth to me. Kill him, if you wish; after that you will settle with me."

Then turning toward Gentle Joe, and speaking as he stepped away:

"All ready here!"

"And ready here!" came back the reply.

"One—"

"Hold on."

In the nick of time was the interruption, the voice rising just at Cathcart's elbow.

"You are covered by a dozen revolvers. Shut your ears to reason at your peril. This thing goes no further now!"

Short and sharp came the words; and as he wheeled and heard the click of half a dozen hammers Cathcart only murmured:

"Why?"

"Because my own safety forbids it. I'm sure of the Ormsby shekels now since here stands Neil Kavanaugh, yonder white-handed thief is a full-fledged fraud, while I am Caton Ormsby."

And Mr. Cathcart was looking full into the glittering eyes of the gentleman known to the Bar as Major Widespin.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WAKE UP.

"Good enough, if you can prove it," said Cathcart, as the major finished his singular statement.

"I've just heard enough not to be surprised at anything you can say; but that don't mean I'm going to believe it without some proof. Here's enough evidence to tear the bottom right out of several stories a good deal bigger than yours. If these two men don't know each other, what's their racket about?"

"I can't help what mistakes or what rascally games they may choose to set up—perhaps something about the estate that I now dare to claim, since it is certain that yonder villain is none the worse for an interview that I once had with him. It may be that they are both mistaken; but I would sooner believe it was the other way. If you have told the truth, and your mission here was to find me, it will be a success, and not the worst job of your life, for I will need you, and will pay you better even than you had counted on being paid, when you have proved for me, as you can, that yonder villain lives, and that I can be once more placed in my proper sphere."

The major talked very quietly, but Cathcart was sharp-sighted enough to see that he had his eyes about him, and was ready for anything.

The citizens of the Bar had taken their positions pretty well out of range at the outset; but by this time they were beginning to crowd up, for it was plain that something more than was bargained for at the outset was happening.

"How is this?" asked Cathcart, turning sharply to the man for whom he had been acting as friend.

"I've come on the ground with you, but if you think to draw me into any plot by which I am to be made a cat's paw, you may find me a worse man than you gave me credit for being. Is there any truth in what Major Widespin has been saying?"

Kavanaugh gave no immediate answer.

He was watching Gentle Joe, and the men that were standing near him, as though he was puzzled from the ground up. The anger that he had shown at the first meeting had some way evaporated. He was not half as anxious as he had been to take a shot at the little gambler. When it came to murder, with a whole town looking on, he was willing to be counted out—at least until the major proved his position. Yet he scarcely seemed to believe Widespin.

Ragged Rufe was around, however. He had been listening, having followed Widespin, as the major went sidling up. When the extraordinary statement was made, a satisfied grin overspread his features.

"Ef ye'r wise, you'll b'leve him. Tell yer, thar's no end ov fun comin' out ov ther mix. It ain't half opened out yet. When yer git clean down to ther rights ov ther thing, you'll jest open yer eyes an' howl."

"I can't see that it's going to make much difference whether I believe it or not. My end of the string is all tied up. I'm ready to leave now. Either way, I'll throw up my hand and get out—but you can bet there'll be an excitement in New York when they get a report of what's going on the other side of the continent. Maybe the major will be willing to slide out while he has the chance, and go back with me. Caton Ormsby—if that is his name—seems to be more interested in Gentle Joe just now; and I don't think he will care to interfere if you'll only let him alone. What say you, major?"

"Give me my pistols. There is more in this than you think fer; and as for yonder dog—I'm not done with him yet. It's a game they've got up to fool me out of my revenge. By the heavens! I'll scalp them both!"

"He ain't half ez mad ez he looks fur," whispered Primrose. "Give him his irons, an' watch him take ther short-cut fur ther gittin' out place—unless he's goin' ter go fur ther major. He may fool you tenderfeet, that hain't seen a regular circus; but not Ragged Rufe—oh, no! Ef ary one ov 'em hed been in airnest, yer don't s'pose all both ov 'em would be standin' jest now? Not much."

"I thought you were Lipscombe's second. Why are you not attending to his affairs?"

The sharp inquiry of Cathcart was pertinent enough, but Rufe was ready for it.

"So I am. Ther very holy minnit I seen thar was a hitch I went right in ter hit ther knot. Ef this hyar white head ain't stirred up, poor Joe won't git a shot; an' after ther way ther game opened, that would break his heart. Ef yer listen a leetle, you'll hear him roarin' now."

Sure enough, Gentle Joe was making his little speech.

"It's a lie, is it; and I don't know my own name? Excuse me, major, I don't want to crowd you, but if you think you can wring in a cold deck like that on a man like me you're way off your base. Proof! Oceans of it! I didn't think I would ever want to prove that the name was mine, but I didn't think if I did I would have any trouble doing it. Yonder detective has a picture of me—taken some years ago—and I haven't changed a bit. Look at it and knock under."

The major had always been noted for being a quiet man, so that no one wondered at his showing no great excitement now. He smiled and waved his hand.

"As between us the Bar will scarcely have any doubts which to choose. If you don't share the fate of the miserable man with whom it last night doomed you to die, it will be because my influence can save you up for something else that is perhaps worse. They are bringing him now—do you want to be elevated alongside of him, or do you want to save your worthless life by telling the whole truth about what seems to be a deep-laid scheme?"

For a time it had seemed as though the cross-eyed man had been forgotten. The crowd was all on the outside, and Mart Hammers was having a very comfortable time standing behind Neddy's bar.

All that was a mistake, however. As the major spoke, a little knot of men came from the rear of the saloon with a rush, dragging in their midst the figure of a bound man.

"Hyar we are; now up with him! We've got Mart kerreled, so's he can't do no damage, an' ther Baby we jist rocked ter sleep. No foolin', but jist show how Blazer's kin sling out jestice when she wakes up!"

"Right you are an' hyar's ther rope all ready knotted fur Gentle Joe. Swing 'em all both off tergether!"

"Good enough! and you, Caton Ormsby, you, Archie Divine, you, Royal George of the road-agents, you all three in one, throw up your hands! We have you foul!"

And quicker than eye could follow, Gentle Joe's hands went up, a revolver in each, that covered the head of the chief of the Bald Eagle gang—Major Widespin.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PLACE OF PAYMENT.

THE major's hands went up, an uneasy look for the first time settling down upon his face as he heard another voice, harsh and stern:

"You galoots ov ther Bald Eagle, an' you other kids ov Royal George's band—don't yer move a step or raise a finger. We've got yer all lined. Honest men of Blazer's Bar, stand aside till ye hear ther hull truth."

So cried a rough-and-ready-looking man, who sprung to the gambler's side, just as two or three of the men that came with him covered the party that dragged up the cross-eyed man, and half a dozen of the men best known about Neddy's Jungle, drew their revolvers and dropped them to an aim. An explosion had come, and found the major unprepared. As he stared into the burning eyes of the speaker, he could only gasp out:

"Who are you?"

"Who am I? Wal, I sh'd smile ter remark. I'm another ov ther men yer murdered, an' hope ter git even; not fur ther shot ov a few hours ago, cowardly ez that war, but fur ther villainous murder ov so many years ago. I'm goin' ter git even clean through, an' jest show yer what yer lost when yer couldn't be an honest man."

"An' hyar's 'nuther ov 'em, major, ez sez ther same thing. I've been a-itchin' fur it these half-dozen years. Oh, I tell yer, we're all hyar, trimmed an' heeled, an' ready fur biz. John Cathcart, now's yer chance. Sail in!"

Ragged Rufe was the happiest man in the whole outfit. He rubbed his hands, and looked from Widespin to Gentle Joe, and then around at the crowd.

"Thar war two tramps a-missin' ther night ov ole Hi Stanley's murder; an' them two tramps war the cross-eyed man, an' yer humble sarvant. Whar we went to ther major kin jest guess a leetle closter than ary man's ever shot off his lip on ther subject."

"Hold your tongue, you infernal, rum-scaked old villain! I want to know who yonder man is. If he can't speak for himself let some one else talk for him."

"Who is it?" broke in Gentle Joe, sharply. "You know who it is—Hiram Stanley, the man you tried to murder; the man who's wealth you filched."

"In deed! Then were it all true that you have been charging here you haven't put up a hanging matter yet. Here is Hiram Stanley, and yonder is Neil Kavanaugh; while, for the proceeds of the mine Hiram can settle with his own brother—Sam Stanley. He took possession; and the deeds that he signed show that it was all regular and correct. What are you going to do about it?"

"Sam Stanley—otherwise Singular Sam—one of your tools; don't bet on him, major. If you had looked after his interests a little better, instead of thinking only of your own when you were playing off Gentle Joe up in the old shafts, you might stand a chance now. But Singular Sam has made a clean breast of it; the girl knows now that he was always a fraud, and never her uncle; and Hi Stanley has got you down fine. But you're a leetle out on the gentleman over yonder. His name is no more Kavanaugh than Singular Sam's was Stanley. He was just part of the little game we have been setting up, and he drew the truth, that we weren't sure of being able to prove, right out of your lips."

A hearty curse dropped from between Widespin's teeth; but he made no other answer, and Joe went on:

"A mighty good imitation he is of the original Kavanaugh, just as I'm a picture of what you were years enough ago to make you almost forget your own looks. I've puzzled you, haven't I? Well, so I ought to. Lightnings blast you, sir! When you slew Neil you did it not for his wrong to me but to suit your own bad hand, and at the same time you killed my last chance; you murdered me body and soul. If you had been anybody else I'd have taken the law in my own hands, and sent you to kingdom come, rejoicing. But I swore, sooner or later, if you lived and gave no sign of repentance, the law should do you justice for the crime against Kavanaugh; and I am keeping my vow. You villain, don't you remember your own sister—Kate Ormsby?"

"Kate—but she is dead and buried! It's a lie!"

Even while he gasped out the words the major staggered back, as though overcome by the unexpected revelation.

His movement was only a blind. He saw, better than his men who were watching him, how completely he was in the toils, unless the whole Bar rose to his aid. There were a dozen men there that would have fought for him, he knew, but every one of them had been singled out, and at the first aggressive movement down they would go.

His movement had thrown Gentle Joe a little off guard. The revolvers were lowered a trifle; and just then, from behind, fell a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

"I dunno ther rights ov this hyar affair, but I do know yer shot my pard frum behind, an' I swore ther fu'st time I got my hands on yer I'd break yer back 'cross my knee. I'm a-goin' ter do it now. This may be your cirkiss, but I'm a-doin' ther actin'!"

As he spoke, Baby Burt, who had staggered up unperceived, caught the gambler by neck and thigh, and whirled him at arm's length up into the air.

Then it was that Widespin saw his chance. First, his hands dropped to his belt, but he found it empty, while the chuckle of Ragged Rufe, a moment before, was now explained. Then he wheeled suddenly, and gave a great spring.

As he leaped, there was heard the crack of a revolver, and he fell forward on his face, the blood streaming from his side.

"I fired that shot!" said a distinctly feminine voice, and Bess Stanley stepped into view, following closely after Jess Hurley, who, a shade sooner, had sprung to the side of the Baby.

"Hold on, pard!" he said. "You've got hold of the wrong end of the string. I'm alive and kicking, and Gentle Joe didn't go back on his side-pards. The man that did the work has his gruel, and there he lies. Put him down easy, and listen to the rest of the story, before somebody bores you."

Jess came just in time. Another moment and either Gentle Joe would have been crushed under the Baby's hands, or the shot that Rufe Primrose was aiming would have gone home.

The little gambler—the Bar was hardly ready yet to recognize him as a woman—regained his feet and his coolness at the same time.

"Mortimer, you have the papers, if Cathcart hasn't. You two had better look this thing over together and take charge of Ormsby. He's hard to kill, and I'll bet you'll find him very little the worse for wear. As for the rest of the gang, Blazer's Bar will settle with them. I reckon this man-hunt has about come to an end."

At that the crowd gave a look at the fallen chief.

He was down on the ground, and his face was ghastly white, now that the false beard he had been wearing since he had sacrificed his own was pushed aside, but his head was pillowed in the lap of a woman whose wrath had evaporated, now that she saw the man she once had loved and who once for all had wronged her, apparently at the last gasp.

Behind the two, with a contemptuous smile on her handsome lips, and a hard light in her eyes, stood Mrs. Ormsby the younger.

"Nurse him if you choose, my dear," she muttered, "but for all that we will neither of us rest easy until he is hanged."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CLOSE OF THE CHASE.

It was just as well that Bess Stanley had fired the shot that had brought the major down. Somehow the outsiders didn't care to make a rush at her; and with him out of the way the rest were fair game for the captors that had so neatly taken them in. Of course some explanation, and some evidence was wanted; and the Bar got both; and was inclined to be wild over the fact that they had had so redoubtable a chief with them so long without knowing it.

The story in full, when it came out, sounded stranger than fiction, and for that reason was not so hard to believe, though there had been so many changes at the Bar that few had any personal recollections of the earlier facts on the case.

When so many were taken in and accounted for there were not many questions asked in regard to Singular Sam. It was currently reported that his neck had been privately elongated; but the fact was that when he had fallen into the hands of Stanley, while exploring in company with Caton Ormsby the recesses of the old mine, he had saved his neck and had a little revenge by an open confession. If he did not then and there tell much that had not been expected he certainly confirmed the story of Hen Hurley and let some light on the one point that was still hazy.

To him had been intrusted the details of the disappearance of the child, after Ormsby had first spirited her away, and he had worked it so well in his own interest that if Hiram Stanley had not turned up he would have had the whip-hand of Ormsby, or made a very pretty complication.

He had saved the girl's life, and as he had managed so that she had never seen him until he found her at the school, back in San Francisco, at which he had caused her to be placed, he had no difficulty in having her recognize him as her uncle.

She did not appear on the carpet when he first entered the Bar, as her possible guardian and the administrator of his supposed brother's estate. The mine was of course sold to the man that then went by the name of Archie Divine, and being worked out was temporarily abandoned, and Divine disappeared, to finally reappear as Major Widespin.

Shortly after that came Singular Sam, bringing with him Bess Stanley, who had by this time grown up to young womanhood.

He had lost track of the major for some years, but their acquaintance was quietly renewed, and Sam informed him that the girl was a waif he had picked up and imbued with the spirit of the story he wished her to believe, until she actually fancied that she was the missing Bess.

Caton Ormsby was a man who was cold enough in other matters; but, easily attracted by the fair sex, he took a fancy to the girl, and out of that fancy Singular Sam saw that serious complications might arise.

The major was inclined to use his position for all it was worth, and succeeded in ingratiating himself with Bess. He even promised, in a grimly grotesque kind of way, to aid her in the search for the murderers of her father. He had no fear that the finger of suspicion would point his way, and for the vanished Caton Ormsby, if he was traced to Blazer's, he had prepared a dummy—the Caton he spoke of at the Eagle—to disappear for him.

Yet she showed terrible shrewdness and courage—that won on him as he recognized the danger, until, at last, in spite of Singular Sam, the major had attempted her abduction. How it failed the reader knows.

The hardest thing to believe was that this Gentle Joe was not the same as the other Gentle Joe—who flourished in these regions many years before.

Such was the fact, however; and he—or she, rather—had come very near to extinction while playing her own little game of vengeance, since, for a time, Hiram Stanley, who had come back to his senses after years of a dazed condition, and Bess Stanley, each was playing a hand that ran counter to hers.

It was Gentle Joe that had really put the elder Mrs. Ormsby on the track, while Stanley had brought in the younger.

At different times and widely separated places the two women had married the same

man. It was a little hard to disentangle their histories; but neither had much reason to regret that justice had overtaken the villain.

Linda seemed to be peculiarly unfortunate, since this was her second marital venture—but Rufe Primrose was the only person at the Bar who knew one more strange coincidence. The first husband, from whom she had been divorced long enough before she met Ormsby, was none other than the man known here as Singular Sam. Before either had wandered to the wild and woolly West, the two men had known each other well, and it was no wonder that Mrs. Ormsby viewed the once boon companion of her former husband with fear and aversion.

There was very little trouble, however, in proving that she was the legal wife of Caton Ormsby that was entitled to the Eastern estates, and the supposition is that her child was amply provided for.

As for Elena—she got as much as she deserved, and probably more. Once definitely proved that her marriage with Ormsby, in the light of the preceding one to Linda, was all a farce, and that Hiram Stanley had brought her there on a useless errand, she accepted the other satisfaction of seeing the villain in the toils, and turned a ready ear to Hen Hurley's wooing. They left Blazer's together; and if his infatuation counted for anything, they were made man and wife by the first available "blacksmith."

The two tramps who had come together again, each on his own hook, though afterward used by Gentle Joe, as their game progressed, would have been part of the case had the Stanley matter been pushed; but as they had nothing to do with what had been done on the other side of the mountains, and only hearsay knowledge, they said their say and then they drifted away, and the region knew them no more.

Gentle Joe left the Bar as Gentle Joe, though no doubt she was rehabilitated before once more entering the bounds of civilization. The detectives went with her, taking with them their prisoner, who had not been so hard hit that the chances were not ten to one that he would suffer the penalties of the law he had so long escaped.

The balance of Ormsby's gang got their deserts in a more or less effective way. The *ci-devant* Royal George had managed his work pretty well, and had evidence enough to make the case clear that these men had been working the roads under the direction of Major Widespin. The men who had been in the case with him had been well paid and had not been idle. He knew of Mortimer's coming and laid a rather unsafe plan to obtain his secret. Singular Sam headed him off there, though he was deceived into believing that it was the *bona fide* Kavanaugh. Thus he had unintentionally aided in the trap for Ormsby, who fell into it without a grain of suspicion. Chance put him in possession of Hen Hurley's story, for he had looked to Jess rather to furnish him information about the earlier times at Blazer's. Jess, as the reader doubtless understands, had been working as a side pard of Gentle Joe, and from the other side of the question, using the Baby as an unconscious tool. It was a narrow thing of it that he did not make bad work in the confusion of identity that Widespin was trying to set up.

Bess Stanley accepted her father as she found him, and had no regrets that she had helped to bring Caton Ormsby to justice. They disappeared as suddenly as they came and their after history was unknown.

And the rest of the men of Blazer's—are they not there, and as willful and as wicked as ever? Some day they may forget it; but as yet they swear by Gentle Joe, the woman that fooled them all, and left just when the camp was most ready to own her as chief.

What will be her end is a question hard to answer. With such a stock of desperate acquirements, and so many years spent in nursing plans for revenge it is most likely that the old stamping-ground will see her again, if she lives, and that some day her death will be as violent and sudden as that to which she doomed her brother. The mills of the gods grind small—and exceedingly sure, as well.

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